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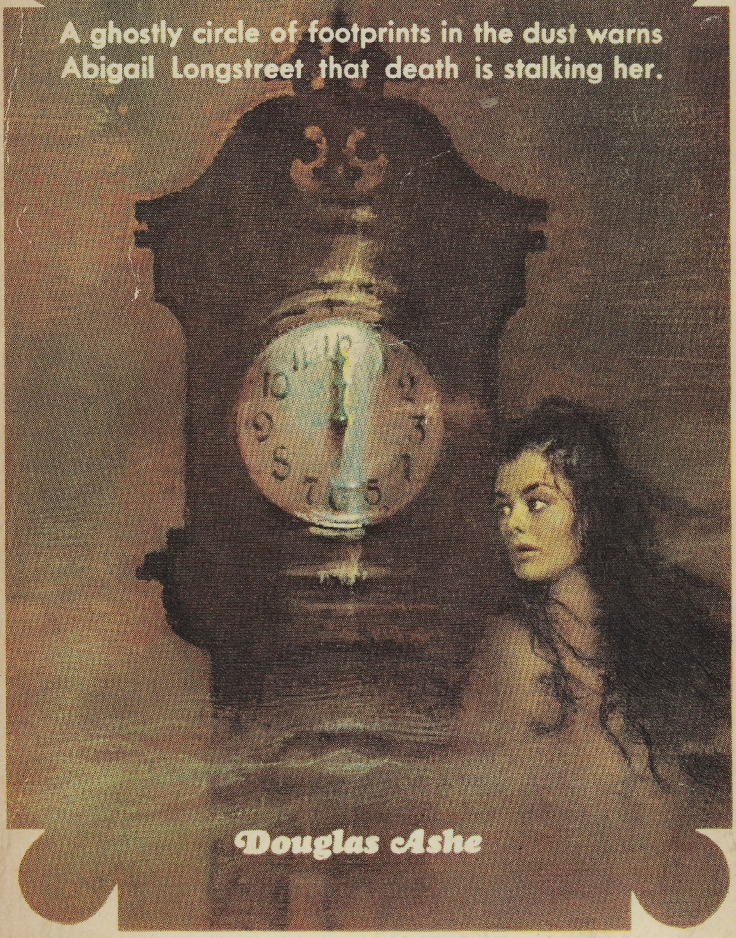
The Longstreet Legacy

(original title: A *Shroud For Grandmama*)

A ghostly circle of footprints in the dust warns Abigail Longstreet that death is stalking her.



Douglas Ashe

ANY OF THE LONGSTREETS MIGHT WANT TO SEE THEIR GRANDMOTHER DEAD—ESPECIALLY IF ABIGAIL IS HANGED FOR IT

They all want Grandmother Longstreet's money, which Abigail will inherit—if she lives.

When Abigail enters the Longstreet mansion for the first time in years, she finds it deserted, and her grandmother dead. Who is responsible for the footprints that circle her body—the Longstreet ghost? But would a ghost hide all her grandmother's clothes, leaving her closet bare save for a shroud? Did a ghost gnaw the raw roast of beef in the refrigerator?

And finally, would a ghost try so hard to convince the police that Abigail is the killer?

THE LONGSTREET LEGACY

(Original Title: *A Shroud for Grandmama)*

By Douglas Ashe

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New York

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NOTICE TO THE READER:

So much that is specious and misinformed has been written and talked about the unfortunate circumstances surrounding the demise of our grandmother that it occurred to me it was the responsibility of some member of the family to act as spokesman for the others. It is the purpose of this volume to set to rights the facts of the matter for those who are of inquisitive minds. *Honi soit qui mal y pense.*

ABIGAIL LONGSTREET

ONE

THE HANDWRITING WAS unmistakably that of my maternal grandparent, as was the notepaper. No Longstreet could be mistaken about that famous copperplate hand; each of us had been sent invitations, couched in the same stilted style upon the same hand-laid paper, from grandmama in our childhood when the head of our family still "received." I, especially, knew that only my grandmother could have written this note since I was the one to whom she still addressed the messages with which she directed the morals and finances of the family; I had seen examples of her handwriting countless times in my twenty-seven years. All petitions to her went through me and it was my lot to forward to the petitioners her decisions. However, in all my experience, I had never known Ella Maybelle Longstreet to request assistance. Yet there was no doubt of the meaning of the words I held in my trembling fingers. "I am in need of succor. Come in haste."

I returned my attention from the note to the young man who had tendered it. He had a pleasant face and his clothes conformed to what I have been told is now considered good taste: in other words, his jacket fitted him like a sack and his trousers were cut to conceal the best of legs. As do most of my family, I prefer the style of another time.

The young man—he had said his name was Arthur Crumb, but of course about that he must have been in error—sat uncomfortably upon the edge of his chair. He appeared to be most intent on maintaining the balance of the cup and saucer, as well as the plate of cakes, I had given him before I had allowed him to mention the subject he wished to discuss. I smiled at him, more in appreciation of a youth who honored a cup of Sèvre's and cherished it from harm than in response to the odd, but certainly strange, message from my grandmama.

This Mr. Crumb had been most importunate over the telephone—an instrument which I loathe and imprecate because of its deletorious effect on manners. He had insisted on seeing me at once. Even when I had told him that I received visitors

only after having arranged an appointment, Arthur Crumb had persisted. He had indeed said, "But, Miss Longstreet, I don't think you understand. This is a matter of life and death."

"For whom?" had been my reply. I have learned that such a statement usually refers only to the interests of the person who has made it.

"Your grandmother's life—or death," had been his instant response. "You are the Abigail Longstreet who is related to the old recluse who secludes herself in that big house on upper Fifth Avenue—aren't you?" His diction had been as slovenly as his syntax, but I had understood his meaning.

"How," I had asked, "did you get my name?"

"From the telephone book. Lady, if that old woman is important to you, I think you'd better stop questioning me and let me see you at once. I have a hunch that there is something very deadly going on."

Before I could reply, the line had been disconnected. I had decided that it was a puzzling event, but doubtless to be explained by the word *crank* of which the newspapers are so fond these days. I had rung for chocolate and was pouring my second cup, when the maid had appeared, breathless, on the threshold of my sitting-room. "A man, Miss Abigail—a Mr. Crumb—he pushed past me, Miss—"

Danvers had tried valiantly to complete her thought, but before her words were out my visitor had pushed past her again—this time into my presence.

"You are—you are Miss Longstreet?" he stammered. I thought he had an unusually ruddy complexion and then I realized that his face was flushed. He had vestigial manners, at least: he was embarrassed by his behavior. It is my nature to think the best of people, so I concluded that for the time I would consider him to be sincere. If he were in reality alarmed about grandmama, this state of mind might account for his lack of decorum.

I inclined my head and indicated a chair at the proper distance from my own. "And your name is Crumb," I said. "Danvers, will you see that Mr. Crumb has some chocolate and cakes?"

The young man had seated himself, protesting—"We may not have much time. I don't know if I should—"

"Nonsense," I said. "I forbid you to talk until you've had your chocolate. You have come to call, you must accept my hospitality." I am not addicted to ritual; in fact, I welcome an occasional variation in my day—but there are certain amenities that may not be dishonored. "The small cakes are good—and not too rich," I said, passing him the caddy.

He accepted the one I had hoped to reserve for myself—it was a wedge covered with bitter chocolate that had a delicate design in raspberry cream. I had to content myself with something that contained almond paste. I do not know how many times I have told cook I detest almond paste.

"Are you uncomfortable, Mr. Crumb?" I asked him. He did not seem in the least relaxed—he struck me as rather tense.

"Uncomfortable? No—um, it is good!—no, it's just that—well, I hadn't expected you to be—aah, so attractive—no, that isn't what I mean—"

"I shall overlook your gauche compliment, as best I can," I said. "Won't you have another cake?" As he took the second cake, I observed to myself that I was pleased by what he said and that I would not overlook the compliment. Some of my relatives tell me that I am too young to live the life I lead, but I know that I would die to live a life like theirs. Still, Mr. Crumb appeared to be a pleasant young man and one who was sincere.

"I'm—I say, I am sorry," he said. "I didn't mean it to sound like—like that. It's only—well, I hadn't expected you to be so young—"

He stopped and flushed again. In my sitting-room I do not expect to hear references either to my degree of comeliness or to my age. It is not that I object on principle, but rather because these subjects are apt to lead to silences or confidences—neither of which I have found rewarding.

"I suggest that you have intended precisely what you have said," I responded, "and that you are sorry to have been so rash." I smiled to show that I was not offended.

He had his cup to his lips, but he returned it to the saucer abruptly, causing an unseemly clatter. "Do you live here all alone?"

"I have Danvers and cook. They do for me."

"But don't you find it large—and lonely?"

"There are only two floors," I said. "As is true of many New York residences in these miserable times, my quarters are cramped."

He said nothing to this, unless an inarticulate sound he made in his throat could be interpreted as an attempt at communication. I could not make heads or tails of it.

"Won't you let me tell you why I've come?" he asked at last. When I said nothing, committing myself neither to approval, nor disapproval, he decided apparently to take a chance. He reached into his pocket and brought forth the crumpled sheet of grandmama's notepaper with its example of her script. He handed it to me.

I examined it and as I read it I had a premonition. All was not well with grandmama. Only last month one of her former parlormaids had come to me with a story to which I had listened and then had dismissed from my mind. This woman had told me that Ella was discharging her entire retinue, one by one. It had been a preposterous suggestion, devised by a clumsy girl seeking employment from another member of the family who hoped to excuse her lack of reference in this way. I despise talebearers and I had said as much to Mabel, for that was her name. Mabel had burst into tears and had claimed that I had impugned her honesty —a statement I had doubted then, but of which I was now not so sure.

"How did you come by this?" I asked Arthur Crumb.

"I was struck on the head by it," he said.

Preposterous!" I told him. "How could you have been struck on the head by a scrap of paper?"

"You may have noted that the paper was crumpled, even though I've tried to smooth it out," he replied. "It had been crumpled about this—here, just a minute—damn, I thought I had it right in this pocket!—I hope I haven't lost it." He was fumbling about in his pockets, a fretted expression upon his face. Then he smiled with relief and withdrew a small, glittering object from one of the inner pockets in which men like to secrete their valuables.

"Here," he said—"here it is. Now what do you think of

that?" And he dropped grandmama's wedding ring into my lap.

Tears started into my eyes and I had to swallow several times to suppress them. There was no question about the ring being Ella's. It was a thin, wide gold band that she had worn ever since her wedding day. I could remember it on her short, plump finger the last time I had seen her, as a little girl more than a dozen years ago. She had said, "Abigail, you are the one I trust—hereafter I shall communicate with your brothers and sisters, as well as the rest of the family, only through you." I had stared at the ring instead of my grandparent's face, and tears had sprung into my eyes even as they had this past moment. I doubted that Ella could have taken that ring from her finger—unless she had grown terribly thin in the intervening years in which none of us had seen her—and I knew she would have considered its removal a sacrilege.

"It is my grandmother's ring," I said aloud. I held it to the light so he could see the faint engraving inside the band—"To Ella from Andrew, with loving respect, September 17, 1897." I said the words softly, as if they were an incantation.

"She must have thrown it from a window," Arthur Crumb said.

"I doubt that my grandmother would do anything so discourteous as that. Why, if thrown with sufficient force from one of the upper windows, it might have done you bodily harm." I rang for Danvers and when she came I requested her to clear away the luncheon things.

The young man had sat there, nodding his head to himself and showing an emotion which could have been taken for exasperation. When Danvers had disappeared silently through the double doors—I believe in well-trained servants—he spoke in a flood of words. Arthur Crumb tended to be impetuous.

"How can you doubt a fact?" he said loudly. "I was struck by that note crumpled about that ring. I was passing your grandmother's house when it happened. I looked up to see a window on the third story close and the drapes pulled tightly and hurriedly over it. I read the note and then I went to the gate and tried to open it. It was locked. I went all

around that moldering brownstone pile and tried the other two gates. They were also locked."

"And quite properly," I assured him. "My grandmother doesn't admit the outside world. She denies its existence."

"She wanted to admit the outside world this morning," he said quickly. "How else can you explain this note?" He paused and patted at his brow with his handkerchief. "Must we sit here quibbling when she may need our help desperately?" he asked. "She may be ill—or in danger?"

"Nonsense," I said, to reassure myself. "Were she ill, the staff would care for her—even to calling for a doctor if it were absolutely essential. And how could she be endangered?"

Arthur Crumb stood up and began to pace my Aubusson rug. He was such a restless young man, yet I admired the way he moved: there was a grace to his movements, a vigor, that I had not observed before.

"I've heard that she had servants locked up in that fortress with her," he said, "but I'd never believed it. I thought it was only a rumor, that really she must be just a dotty old eccentric like the Collyer brothers."

"Grandmama is not dotty," I said. "She is a charming and cultivated person who prefers to lead a secluded and ideal existence. She abhors hurly-burly."

"And she never goes out?"

"In that you are entirely right," I replied. "Grandmama never leaves the house."

Arthur Crumb hesitated, patting the knot in his tie. "I've also heard it said that none of her servants leaves the grounds. I think I've seen someone, possibly a gardener, puttering about when I've gone by." He paused and fidgeted with his tie which did not need the adjustment he did not make. "There are places where you can see into the grounds through the high iron fences," he added. "I mean, I was only walking past and I happened to glance through the fence and—well, I saw this old fellow, he could have been the gardener, puttering."

I saw that he was over-anxious that I be reassured that he had not been spying upon my grandmother's retinue. But why should I think he had been involved in a surreptitious activity?

"She has—or had—a gardener, as well as a butler and a cook and two maids, one for upstairs and one for downstairs," I told him. Mabel had been one of the maids and I did not know if she had been replaced. I doubted it, since usually I received a message requesting me to handle the initial interviews. When I had selected a girl or two who accepted grandmama's conditions, and who understood them thoroughly, she made the final choice herself.

"Is it true that the servants are not allowed to leave?" the young man asked.

I nodded my head. "Not as long as they are employed. When they resign, or are dismissed, they are of course requested to leave. Few have done so, I might add."

"Incredible," said Crumb. "And in nineteen-fifty! How does she ever get them to agree to these terms?"

"She pays good wages," I said. "They are sure of their place. She demands good service. A true servant is happiest under such a mistress." Mabel had seemed foolish and unhappy, yet a few years before when I had recommended her to grandmama she had appeared poised and capable.

"Don't you think we ought to do something?" Arthur Crumb said. The tone of his voice had altered—it had an impatient despairing ring. "It wasn't easy for me to phone you," he went on. "I almost didn't—I think if another fellow had been struck by that same note he would have shrugged, tossed it into the gutter and gone on about his business. But I felt I had to—"

"What is your business?" I asked. I hoped he might catch the implication in my question.

"You think I ought to mind it?" he laughed. "I'm an editor on the *Manhattanite.*"

"Is that the magazine which prints those dreadful cartoons?"

He was not flustered. "Some of them are rather good."

I began to mistrust him. An editor was the next thing to a reporter and a reporter was the last person who should have anything to do with grandmama. All the family had been fending them off for years, although I am not certain that my brother Jasper has his heart in his fending. Jasper has had some scrapes that nearly resulted in publicity.

"Aren't we going to do anything?" Arthur Crumb asked again.

"We are not," I said, standing. I rang for Danvers. "It was kind of you to come about this message, Mr. Crumb. I shall send grandmama a postal tonight, inquiring about her health. Did you have a hat?"

He turned slowly and faced me. He was not smiling. His mouth had grown long and manly; his chin was outthrust and his shoulders rigid. "Miss Longstreet, you may do as you please. But if you want to see your grandmother alive again I think you had better pay her a visit as quickly as you can. I had been about to offer my services, but now—"

"They won't be needed," I said. Danvers had his hat and was handing it to him. It had been a good hat and it retained some of its lines despite its age. I liked the young man, but it is not prudent to allow anyone to be forward—even someone you like.

He walked to the door, then swerved about, stared at me and mumbled.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said the name is Crump," he said, "not Crumb."

"How unfortunate for you," I told him. "But then you can't help it, can you?"

I had waited several minutes—time enough for Arthur Crump to reach the street and get out of sight—before I had Danvers help me into my coat and hat. My car was parked in front of the building and I was on my way up Fifth Avenue soon enough. I had decided that the young man was properly concerned about my grandmother and that I should make an investigation. I had disagreed only on the advisability of Arthur Crump's accompanying me.

Ella would be furious that I had come to call but she would have disowned me had I brought an editor. As it was, I had the pretext of the note that Crump had received in such an extraordinary fashion and this in itself would serve me well enough as a reason for my presence. I also had the keys to the front gate and the front door; Ella had mailed them to me several months ago. At the time I had marvelled that grandmama had entrusted me with her seclusion and I had

sworn never to betray the trust. Now I speculated as to whether the sending of the keys had not been but the first of the series of strange events which had continued with Mabel's dismissal and her wretched story of Ella's persecution of the servants and had ended, I hoped, with the missive that was in part a projectile.

I went through a red light, so great was my concentration on these questions, and I admonished myself to settle down to my driving and try not to answer simple questions that Ella could clear up in a moment.

The difficulty lay in the fact that I felt that my grandmama would not be able to clarify these minor, if puzzling, mysteries. I asked myself why I felt this to be so, and I went through another red light.

It is indeed fortunate that there are so few policemen on corners these days.

I did feel queer, though. As I approached the great Longstreet place that filled a city bock and overlooked the Park, the house in which I had been born, as had my mother and my grandmother, I felt a deep and pervasive dread.

I am a rational person who knows there is a commonsense explanation for every phenomenon, no matter how paradoxical and weird it might seem.

Even so, I could not understand how grandmama could have thrown that note, twisted about her ring, so that it struck a passerby. None of the other family members knew it—I, alone, had been entrusted with the knowledge—but there was a reason why Ella was a recluse and her servants were so loyal.

She was stone blind.

TWO

GRANDMAMA HAD NOT retreated from the family; the family had retreated from her. I might add that this movement had not been what the military likes to term a strategic withdrawal; grandmama had been in sole command of each action and had forced my relatives to absent themselves according to her desire. Only I had been allowed the option of remaining, upon the condition that, as had Ella, I

become a recluse. My grandparent's way of life had been one that even as a slip of a girl I had admired and respected, but I had been youthful enough to prefer the world to the cloister. Ella had been disappointed, but not surprised, at my decision: from that day forward my only contact with her had been by post.

I can still remember the afternoon of my decision. For several months I had been the single Longstreet who resided in the great house with grandmama. I had been given an apartment to myself on one of the upper floors, a horse that I might ride in the Park whenever I desired and the free use of the Rolls as well as the chauffeur who came with it. Grandmama had not allowed me to entertain my friends at home, but even this restriction had been no hardship. Even then I had found the people of my age and circumstances vulgar and footling. I elected the joys of introspection and the lady arts. I was on my way to becoming the competent needlewoman I am today. I was dabbling in china painting and I had a loom of my own on which I attempted to recapture the hardy patterns of a simpler epoch; except for an occasional visit to the opera or the orchestra and a trip to the theater whenever a reputable classic was on the boards, I was content with my own version of Ella's solitude.

I must say that not all the Longstreets, unfortunately not even the majority of those alive, are as sound or as honorable. There are two traditions in our family, as I have been told there are in other clans: one of conservation and creativity and another of dissipation and destruction. In keeping with the parlous times deviltry has the upper hand among us now; but it has had advantage before and the true, the elevated line of merit, that courses even in our blackguards' blood, has won out and will again.

The original Longstreet is lost in the mists of antiquity and there is not a shred of reliable evidence to prove that he was a werewolf. One branch of the family migrated to Wales in the Sixteenth Century while the other lost itself in the vastness and squalor of Central Europe and has not been heard from since. I have studied Ella's charts and listened to her interesting discourses on our genealogy, but I must confess to a poor mind for dates and a worse one for family names. A Longstreet came to America on the Mayflower and

another was among the settlers of New Amsterdam. The earlier colonist failed to survive an Indian attack, but my great-great-great-grandfather established a counting house on Manhattan Island and prospered despite a running conflict with Peter Stuyvesant. I may say that a Nineteenth Century historian who became interested in our family attempted to prove that the New York Longstreet was a descendant of the lost, or Central European, branch of the family: his argument stemmed from the unlikelihood of a Welshman sailing for America from the Lowlands. His theory I consider heresy for it would indicate that all of us decended from the unfortunate branch; but then again what would it matter? To believe that some of the disquieting characteristics of certain of my relatives might be the result of having as ancestors rapscallions instead of thrifty, industrious folk would be rank superstition.

I had been reading, that afternoon on which I was last summoned into my grandparent's presence, one of the few modern authors whose writings have any moral substance, Jane Austen. The butler had appeared at the door to my sitting-room and had reported that my grandmother had expressed the desire to see me. I had laid my book aside—I have never been able to return to that particular vloume because of the poignant memories that recur even when I think of it—and had followed the butler along the corridor and down the curving staircase to the entrance hall. Left alone in the huge hall, I had begun to walk slowly towards the small drawing room at the end of it; the late afternoon light fell in mote-filled beams from the high windows above the entrance, making the diamond-shaped designs in the parquetry glimmer with gold fire. The twin rows of portraits that hung on the two-storied walls gazed down upon me and I, feeling the force of their silent inquiry, stood still and confronted them.

My paternal ancestors were upon one wall and those of the maternal side were upon the other. The paintings were huge and dark, their detail only dimly felt, making the salient features of the Longstreet face shine forth like a series of monuments. The Longstreet forehead, the Longstreet eyes, the Longstreet mouth: here was a set of variations upon these themes—Abner Longstreet, the New Amsterdam banker, whose pate had been the highest, whose mouth the smallest;

his wife, Mathilde, a small dark face with burning bright curiosity; Ephraim Longstreet, Abner's son, who had continued his father's business, and Helena, his tall, long-faced wife who had borne him one child, a girl. In the midst of the hall, the visual theme leaped across to the other wall: the next portrait was that of Agatha Longstreet Park, a large-faced woman with the cold, luminous eyes and small mouth that spoke of her tenacity, her prideful conservatism. Her husband, Bentham Park, was a thin man whose cheeks were cavernous, lips loose and indulgent, eyes nearly averted. Agatha had been the Longstreet—although her married name was Park she was referred to as a Longstreet—who had invested the family fortune in lots above Washington Square and who had pushed her husband to join with those who had imposed a plan upon the city. Within her lifetime she had seen the Longstreet wealth increase four-fold and her daughter, Sybil, marry a French marquis. To prevent the family wealth from slipping into foreign hands, Agatha had esablished a trust fund, bequeathing income only to Sybil and her nephew, Jacob. Andrew and Ella Longstreet had been cousins and with their marriage, Ella's maiden name having been D'Yvetot, the two American branches of the family had been reunited and the halved estate made whole.

I had walked by each portrait and had come to Ella's door, mindful again of the quality in our line that had made one Longstreet in each generation aware of the responsibility to conserve wealth, and the good fortune that had enabled this Longstreet each time to control the pursestrings. I had not been thinking of my grandmama's rancor that had led her to quarrel with my mother, my brothers and my sister and had forced them to live elsewhere. The last of these contretemps had occurred some years in the past when I was small, and I had yet to learn all the details of the scandal that had driven my mother into the world and restricted her visits to me to an afternoon every other month. I was not fond of my mother then, nor am I now: she is a fashionable woman who even at fifty takes satisfaction in irresponsibility. On that afternoon I scarcely thought of that pretty face and pale blue eyes framed by a riotous swarm of red-gold curls—characteristics that I have inherited from her—and the voluptuous, pouting mouth—a feature that is not like mine; I have

the Longstreet mouth and I thank heaven for it. My attention was not upon my grandmama and her wants, which she was soon to make known; instead I existed in a pleasant state of revery, aware of my place in the Longstreet line, a few of the excellent Jane's aphorisms ringing in my head. But when I pushed open the door of the back drawing room, I sensed immediately that with my grandmother something was amiss.

She was a small, plump woman with a commanding head and large, evocative grey eyes that pounced upon you and drew you towards her until she had told you what she wished and then sent you away by abruptly disregarding you. Although I could hardly have felt the force of her gaze as I entered the drawing room, since she had been seated in a high-backed chair at the farthest corner, nevertheless I had known at once that some one of her qualities was misplaced, if not wholly lacking. As I walked to her I became aware that, though she sensed I had come into her room, she was at loss to know from which direction I approached. Ella had kept turning her impressive head, the tiny gold earrings twitching petulantly, seeking me. She sat in near darkness since the velvet drapes were drawn tightly over the windows and the lamps were not alight. I had noticed before Ella's liking for the dark and it should not have made me uneasy.

"Sit down, girl," my grandmama had said, her voice pleasant and deep and oracular. "There is a chair about? If not, you can find one, can't you, girl? Sit down, I say."

The nearest chair was across the room and it was heavy. My movements in procuring it and the scrapings caused by my clumsiness in arranging it near my grandmother irritated her and I could see the flickering glints of her earrings as her head sought back and forth.

"Shall I turn on a light?" I had asked.

"No. No light. Are you seated, child?" She had fought to be mannerly and kind, but I was sure of the annoyance that was her true feeling and that came out in the abruptness of her commands and questions. I had been taught not to query matriarchal authority, and I still believe it a good rule to abide, so I did not resent a right I considered natural.

"Give me your hand, Abigail," grandmama said.

I had placed my hand in hers and as I had done so, I had experienced a great, disturbing chill. Her palm was hard and

her fingernails were like keen blades that threatened my flesh, but the thrill that possesed me did not come from the latent cruelty of her grasp. It was my body's signal that I had discovered a whole, a pattern, a unity—grandmama and I had become one.

"My eyes no longer accept this world, girl," the old woman had said, "and I must request the gift of yours."

Her words were strange, but they had not frightened me. Nor had I attempted to determine their meaning. At that moment I had first known the certain peace of accepting a duty and having one's being in it. How many of my readers will know the significance of renunciation, and the pure joy of discovery that is its reward, I cannot surmise; I am wilful enough not to care. Let those who are curious puzzle what I have written—the others will have read past long since.

"You don't understand me, child. I have startled you. Forgive me." Grandmama's voice was soft now, it made me think of the greying, motherly sea as it tucks the foamy edge of its blanket about the naked beach. I could see Ella in the shadowy room, could study the details of her face, and I saw her as a placid monument, a timeless effigy before which I cast my life.

There was delicate, starchy ruching about her plump throat and her bodice was a womanly rose. Her skirt was of the same color and the same rich stuff: it fell in folds to cover her small feet that were elevated upon an embroidered pillow like tiny lapdogs upon a silken throne. The fragrance of roses was pervasive and for an instant I saw a vision of a wild bouquet, a vivid crumple of flesh and petals, tossed and torn in a lacy grey sea. Then the image had faded and I saw grandmama again, a small woman whom the years had made girlish and sweet, smiling at me, my queen.

"I am blind, Abigail—I need your help," she had said.

We had sat together in the dark room until evening while Ella had told me her plans, how I could air her and under what conditions I might live with her. "It is not a life for youth, girl—or not the life youth would choose. If you decide against it, I shall provide a place for you and you may carry out your responsibilities according to instructions you will receive. But you may never return to this house again, nor shall we see one another."

I had wept and she had comforted me, the smooth stuff of her bosom like the inner pelt of a rose. I had asked about her affliction and she had told me that it had come upon her suddenly, although she had been prepared. "The sight of this world has long been an oppression to my eyes, child," she had said, "and now I know there is grace in the dark." I had reached my hand towards her face and her sightless lids had quiveringly kissed my fingertips. I had know then, as I had felt the scars, that acid or some corrosive substance had blinded her. And I had wondered if the hand that had closed her windows on the world had been her own.

I had left the house the following week without seeing grandmama again. But I have never felt apart from her.

I left my car on a side street and walked towards the front gate of the Longstreet mansion. The high, wrought-iron fence paced beside me as I walked and the overgrown lawn stood as an additional barrier. I slowed my steps as I neared the gate and stood before it, the key I held in my hand extended hesitantly. The act of inserting the key in the lock and turning it, of pushing open the gate that had remained closed so many years, was one I dreaded. I knew that even tradesmen's parcels had been left in a locked box near the former servants' entrance, as at a nunnery. The front gate had shut upon me many years before and now it was to open for me again: it seemed a sacrilege. I felt superstitiously in the pocket of my coat for the crumpled note that Arthur Crump had given me; it was my authority and I knew it a poor one. There was another reason why I stood before the gate and would soon violate it. I was curious.

I am proud of my ability to face unpleasant facts about myself. As soon as I had admitted my curiosity, I lost my hesitancy. I was committing a crime against the one member of my family whom I loved, whom I knew to be a part of myself; but there it was and I was done with it. The key fitted the lock neatly and the tumblers turned noiselessly. It was like Ella to insist that even the lock of an unused gate be kept oiled.

The walk was overgrown with grass, as it had not been the last time I had passed the house. Arthur Crump had spoken of seeing a gardener at work in the grounds recently, although

he had not said how recently. The rank growth was evidence that Ella no longer had a gardener, which in a way supported the parlormaid's account of the gradual dismissal of her staff by my grandparent; at least the uncared-for lawn did not refute a story I had not wanted to believe. I made my way deliberately up to the front door of the huge house, a great oak door with stained-glass inserts and an ornate brass knocker which shone and glittered and must have been polished lately.

It would be proper to ring the doorbell. As I had the thought, I placed my finger on the button—but did not press it. The urgent tone of the note hinted a danger. Was it possible that there might be someone in the house with Ella who woud be warned by the sound of the bell? It was an unlikely suggestion, but I am a cautious person who believes in avoiding unnecessary chance-taking. And grandmama had sent me the key—was that not in itself a tacit admission of my right to enter the forbidden house?

I fitted the second key into the second lock and crossed the threshold of the great house where I had spent my girlhood. The long, two-storied hall was empty and a thick layer of dust covered the parquetry. I saw two strange sights at once, or so it seemed to me. In places the heavy dust on the floor was disturbed by a rushing circle of footprints, as if someone had been running a frantic race in the hall—and all the portraits hung with their faces turned to the wall.

I stepped into the hall and stood on the edge of the inexplicable circle of footprints. No one had walked or run in a circle once—someone had gone round it countless times in a frenzied haste. The prints overlaid one another, were smudged and distorted, elongated where whoever had run had slipped and had fallen, yet never turned off from the tight circle that had a diameter of no more than twenty feet.

The brunt of the unexpected narrows the field of vision. I do not know how long it was that I stared at those mysterious footprints before I became aware of the pink and white blur at the farthest edge of the circle. Once I saw it, I skirted the footprints but walked swiftly towards the blur. My eyes recognized its shape as that of the recumbent form of a woman, a woman nearly naked—or rather wearing one of those scandalous swimming suits that the magazines call

Bikinis. The suit was of thin white cloth that had been dirtied by the dust of the floor and it consisted only of a sketchy bandeau and a diaper-like covering about the thighs. The woman who wore it was old and thin with a great head of snow-white hair and staring, blind eyes whose lids and balls were scarred and pitted.

I had known my grandmama as a demure, retiring lady who dressed in the modest style of a decenter time. I found her dead, in the midst of a desperate race that she had run, in attire that was worse than nudity.

Under the circumstances, I could only faint.

THREE

"ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?"

Arthur Crump swayed above me, swayed slightly from side to side. I was suspended in space, no, held up by a warm, strong pressure across the middle of my back and under my knees. The young man's face was creased with anxiety, his mouth was open and he breathed heavily, his dark eyes were intent and kind.

"Are *you* all right?" I responded, my voice surprising me with its feebleness, its poor, cracked tone. My throat ached as if I had screamed. "You keep swaying," I told him.

He smiled. "Do you think you could stand?" He lurched slightly as he asked me this question and I thought how perverse it was of him to be concerned about me when he was the one, obviously enough, who seemed about to fall. Then the pressure across my back shifted slightly and I realized—it was a shock!— that what held me up were a man's arms, Arthur Crump's arms—I, who had never allowed any man the slightest intimacy.

"I am certainly capable of standing without support," I said.

"Well, if you think so." Arthur's face tilted and made half of a revolution. The floor struck my feet a solid blow, the ceiling teetered and rotated. The warm pressure returned to my back and I leaned against it, ashamed to be grateful for it. The world slowly righted itself, but Arthur Crump's

face kept falling down towards mine until his lips bumped into my lips and I opened my mouth to cry out my surpirse.

He had kissed me. "How dare you?"

"You are very beautiful," he said, hurting me as he held me. "I couldn't resist it."

I pushed him away, wanting to strike his face but knowing that distance would be a greater rebuff than violence. "What are you doing here?"

"You didn't think I'd lose sight of you?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

He smiled at me and caught my hand, which I snatched away immediately—but not before I had once more felt that warm, reassuring pressure. "I waited across the street from your building in my own car," Arthur said, "until I saw you come out and drive away. Then I followed you. When you parked, I found a parking place near yours. It took some time, but I'd guessed where you were bound. When I found the gate to the house open, I knew I was right. You left the front door ajar too, you know. That's how I managed to get in. And I found you lying here, on the floor—near *her.*"

I pressed my hand against my mouth and bit my knuckles to keep from crying aloud. With his last words it all had come back—I had remembered entering the old house, seeing the incredible circle of footprints and—I turned and saw Ella's body again—gaunt, near-naked, the gaping mouth, the staring, pitted eyes, the pale, dirtied, pathetic flesh.

"Did *grandmère* dress like that all the time?" Arthur inquired. "She was a trifle emaciated for a French bathing suit." His tone was arrogant, but I could not tell him to leave me. I did not want to be alone. "What do you suppose took her off? A heart attack? Or a stroke?" he went on mercilessly.

"My grandmother dressed modestly," I said—"in the styles of another time. She wouldn't be seen dead in a—oh!" And I began to sob like a ninny.

Arthur stood by and held my hand until I stopped. "I told you she was dotty," he said. "She'd have to be to lock herself and the servants up in a big house like this and never see anybody, Say!"

"She wasn't 'dotty'—" I began.

"Wait a minute! The servants! Where are the servants?"

"My grandmama wasn't 'dotty,' " I said. "She was one of the few sane women left in this decadent world."

Arthur Crump was disregarding me. He had started whistling softly to himself and was walking speculatively down the great hall to the curving staircase, taking care to avoid Ella's body and the circle of footprints.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

He looked over his shoulder. "I'm going to search the house and find out what happened to the servants. Do you feel strong enough to come along?" His voice echoed in the empty hall.

I felt shaky, but I was not going to let him ransack my grandmama's house. After all, I knew only as much about him as he had told me—that he was an editor and he had been passing the house earlier that day. "I'm coming," I said.

"Shut and lock the door first," he said. "You don't know who might walk in."

I thought he had said a most ironic thing, but I did as he suggested. Then I walked down the hall to where he was standing beside the staircase, taking care to walk in his footprints—why I did not know.

"Where should we look first?" he asked. "Upstairs or downstairs?" He rubbed the newel post with his hand and it came away black. "If there are any servants about, *grandmère* has let them get lax."

"Grandmama insisted on a spotless house," I said. "Something must have gone terribly wrong."

"I don't know about that. Maybe she had a heart attack and the servants decamped." He thought for a moment. "But without telling anyone," he mused. "And why should she dress up in a Bikini, as if she were going to pose for some cheesecake . . ."

"For some cheese—?" I began.

He grinned at me, then drew a long face. "Cheesecake. Pin-up girls. Sexy pictures."

"I'm sure that has nothing to do with my grandparent," I said.

"You know, you must've led an awfully sheltered life?" He was not smiling and he caught my hand and squeezed it.

"I don't care for people who take unfair advantage of me, Mr. Crump. You should realize that I have received a terrible

blow this afternoon. I loved my grandmother dearly." What I said was true and it was a lie. I felt like crying, like running from the house and into the Park, finding a dark hollow and hiding in it, never to be found. At the same time, I wanted him to hold my hand, to hold me in his arms—to—to do things that I had the moral fiber not even to imagine to myself.

"You're right, Abigail. You're dead right—and I do want to help you. Which room shall we look in first?"

The word dead made the slow, burning lump inside me rise into my throat and the fiery tears flow from my eyes. I hated myself for crying—I have never been weak.

He caught hold of me, his voice caressing—"Abigail, I shouldn't have said that word—I shouldn't have said 'dead,' I know—"

I began to cry harder, although I wanted to stop.

Later, we searched every room in the mansion and there are more than forty of them. Our search did not take long because only a few rooms in the entire house showed any signs of having been put to use in years. Most of the windows had locked blinds, the furniture was in dust covers, the books in piles, the beds stripped and the pictures put away. Only two small rooms in the servants' quarters, my grandmother's bedroom on the second floor and the back drawing room downstairs had been occupied recently. The servants' rooms were clean and bare of clothes or personal effects. There were some unwashed pots and dishes in the kitchen sink. The back drawing room was just as I had remembered it—the drapes drawn, the high ladder-backed chair in the far corner—and free of dust. By the chair in which my grandmama had liked to sit was a half-drunk cup of tea with a fresh-looking slice of lemon floating in it. I placed my hand on the cup and dipped a finger into the tea. It was not warm, but it was not yet cold. I told Arthur what I had discovered.

He nodded his head. "She must've been alive earlier today," he said. "Have you forgotten that she threw the note, wrapped around her ring, out the window at me?"

"My grandmama would never have done that," I insisted.

"Then there was someone else alive here," he said.

"Although, personally, I think it was your grandmother. What do you think could've happened to all the servants?"

I told him then about Mabel's story and the peculiar circumstance of Ella sending me the keys a few months back. "I didn't believe the maid's story at the time," I said.

"Suppose she did discharge the servants," Arthur said. He was tapping his finger on an ashtray that stood upon a small table beside the ladder-backed chair. "Is there any way we could get in touch with them?"

"I have their names," I said, "and also their addresses and previous references."

"Good girl," Arthur said distractedly. He was looking at the finger he had been tapping on the ashtray. It was smudged with cigarette ash. "Did your grandmother smoke?" he asked.

"Of course not," I said. But I looked at the ashtray too. There was a small amount of cigarette ash still in it, not more than would have fallen from a single cigarette. I also saw the remains of the cigarette, about a quarter inch of what I think they call a butt.

"She must've had a visitor, then," Arthur said, "and he left his cigarette burning in the ashtray. He couldn't have held a stub in his fingers until it had burnt that low."

I did not tell him what I knew, but there was one smoker—a detestable habit, smoking—who habitually smoked his stubs down that far. The picture of my brother Jasper came into my mind. Jasper, long and lean with his delicate angelic features, the damp brown eyes that seemed so kind and sympathic, the leer on his lips punctuated by the glowing smidgeon of cigarette and the curling wisp of blue smoke that swirled about his face and would have made anyone but a devil blink.

"The police will want to find out who her visitor was," Arthur was saying, "and ask him a few questions that will be hard to answer."

"The police?" I asked.

"Sure. You're going to call the police, aren't you?" He glanced at me quickly and then smiled. "I'll call them for you, if you like. Where's the telephone?"

"Grandmama wouldn't allow one in the house," I said.

"But now that *grandmère's* dead—and perhaps murdered by a hand or hands unknown—I'm certain she wouldn't care,"

he said. He looked at me again. "Or did you mean the telephone?"

"I was referring to the telephone," I told him coldly. "My grandparent wouldn't permit one to be installed. But neither would she have allowed a policeman to investigate a family affair."

Arthur moved forward and started to put out his hand. Something in my manner must have made him think better of his rashness. He had a talent for familiarity and I did not care for it. "Abigail," he said, "you must call the police. They would be very angry with you if you overlooked a detail like a murder."

"I shan't need the police," I said. "And grandmama wasn't murdered."

His brow creased and he appeared to be anxious. "You must admit she died under very peculiar circumstances," he said. "You told me yourself that she wasn't the kind that collects French bathing suits. And only this morning she threw a note out of the window begging for help. She could have been murdered."

"Poppycock," I said. "Grandmama has had a weak heart for many years. She must have been suffering an attack this morning. And how many times must I tell you that my grandmother would never be so discourteous as to throw anything out of a window?"

"Someone threw that note from some place within these grounds," Arthur Crump said, flushing slightly. "Unless you think I'm lying—"

"I have not suggested that you lied," I said quietly. It was my intention to stand my ground, but I did not wish to injure his feelings in the process. He was a likeable young man who, if kept within bounds, might be of great assistance in the irksome duties that, even at this early stage, I foresaw would be mine.

"You said yourself that the note was in your grandmother's handwriting," he argued.

"I am not denying it," I answered. "And I think it likely that it was thrown from a window in this house—but not by my grandmother, nor my grandmother's behest. I believe that grandmama wrote that note and intended to have it mailed to me. That it was delivered to me so circuitously—

and so impolitely involved you—must have been due to circumstances, perhaps supernatural but certainly beyond grandmama's control."

I might as well say now, so as not to mislead those curious enough to peruse these pages, that I do not believe in ghosts. I considered that I was justified in confiding to Arthur certain curious information about my grandmother's household and ancestors which the more gullible members of my family, even to this day, believe to have only psychic explanations. In doing so I was deliberately holding a false scent before my bloodhound's nose, hoping he would go off baying at a tangent.

"Did you say *supernatural?*" he asked.

"I did indeed," I told him. "My grandparent was cursed with a poltergeist by the name of Sybil. The annoying and presumptuous actions of Sybil were among the reasons why grandmama secluded herself—and also why she encountered difficulty in retaining servants. The fact that grandmama apparently lacked a staff on the day she died can doubtless be accounted for by Sybil. I've never known a greater nuisance."

"Just what is a poltergeist?" Arthur Crump demanded, his face turning a deeper color. "You're pulling my leg!" This vulgarity I considered it best to ignore.

"I'd thought you rash, but not ignorant," I replied. "Poltergeists, as any well-informed child should know, are particularly mischievous and malicious ghosts. They are given to bumptiousness, rather than evil. Sybil's favorite trait is to waltz furiously in the great hall at inappropriate times. She also likes to throw small objects at people's heads, as no doubt she threw grandmama's ring and note at yours."

Arthur caught my hand and held it, despite my attempts to squirm away. "Now wait a minute!" he cried. "Don't think you're going to fob off any such idiocy on me. I shall never, never believe that a poltergeist hit me on the head with that note!"

I did not believe it myself, so I could hardly blame him. Still, he had not mentioned the police for several minutes and it appeared probable that, if I continued to interest him in the lore of the Longstreets, he might forget about the authorities until a time when I could dissuade him more reasonably.

"I shall never forget the first time I saw Sybil," I said, dropping my eyes as if in revery. "I couldn't have been more than twelve—it was Christmas and a great occasion for me. Grandmama was allowing me to sit at table with the rest of the family for the first time.

"I remember the long, long table and the shining napery—the floral centerpiece crowned with holly berries and the grave faces of the footmen who stood behind grandmama's chair. My grandmother, quite rightly, demanded decorum at dinner and even my brother Jasper was behaving himself. My mother conversed with Doctor Phillips in whispers; my sister Maud kept her eyes upon her plate as if ignorant of the great beauty of her red-gold hair, her pale cheeks."

"What has all this to do with poltergeists?" Arthur asked roughly.

I put my finger to my lips. "If you will only listen, you will soon learn," I answered. "I think it was during the fish course that we heard the music box. Its distant tinkle was quite merry—as I remember, the strains were those of Strauss' 'Tales from the Vienna Woods.' But it was entirely out of keeping with the tone of a family dinner at grandmama's. At first, we all tried to pretend that we didn't notice. Then Jasper had a fit of hiccoughs, from suppressing a snicker, I suppose, and one of the footmen, upon a command from grandmama, pounded him upon the back.

"After Jasper's seizure had subsided and he was restored, we had thought that the odd incident was closed. Unfortunately, the sound of the music box became louder at that instant, and to it were added other sounds, equally unusual. Someone was humming the waltz in a clear, high voice—and we all heard the soft whisper of ballroom slippers gliding over a polished floor. I recall that grandmama turned her head towards the door that communicated with the great hall and for a silent moment heeded the strange music. Then she stood and looked down on us all.

" 'It is no use pretending that we do not hear,' she had said loudly. 'Especially since I believe that there is one of us present who does not know about Sybil.' And then she had proceeded to tell the room, but really ony me, about the wonderful and pitiful story of Sybil D'Yvetot."

"Who was Sybil D'Yvetot?" Arthur asked. "Sounds French to me."

"She was my great-grandmother," I replied, "who married a French marquis. She had only one child, late in life—my grandmama. Ella. Sybil's parents disapproved of her marriage to the Marquis D'Yvetot and she lived most of her life in France, in a moldering chateau that was inadequately staffed and lacked conveniences. According to family accounts she had been a merry girl who had married out of love, rather than convenience as was more conventional in those days. But the marquis, who was impoverished, had been gravely disappointed when Sybil's family cut her off with only part of the family fortune, though a good part, and that entailed to her first child. It is said that once he learned of the conditions of the will he no longer knew her as a husband, although he demanded of her all the domestic virtues. Grandmama once told me of having seen her mother down upon her hands and knees scrubbing the floors of the great ballroom of the Chateau D'Yvetot.

"The marquis, on the other hand, managed to get full control of Sybil's income and with it he indulged himself, and himself alone, in the creature comforts. Sybil, who had been a great dancer and who had been expert at the waltz when it was a step not known to the Americas, was never to dance or entertain again. She lived the rest of her life shut up in the great chateau while her husband beguiled the time with his cards, his stables and his mistresses.

"Then, in the last year of her life, Sybil sent word across the Atlantic that she was with child. Her father had died but her mother, my great-great-grandmother, Agatha, still survived although she was aged. She sent her daughter funds at once to return to New York and have her child at home, but she did not hear from Sybil again. The marquis must have intercepted the letter and the draft, destroying the first and squandering the last. And when my grandmama was born, her mother died, unattended by either midwife or physician. A servant smuggled the baby out of the house and used her own savings to buy passage across the ocean to bring the infant home. So grandmama was reared in New York and no Longstreet has ever had relations with any other D'Yvetot again—I don't doubt that the family has died out.

"Grandmama had it from the old servant's own mouth—she loved the woman deeply since she had been a foster mother to her—that her own mother's, Sybil's, last words had been—*'Et maintenant, que nous commençons le ball!'* Or 'And now, let us begin the ball!' And from that day forward, whenever the family fore-gathered formally, Sybil could be heard in the great hall at home, waltzing as she seldom had in life. Grandmama has told me that as a child she even once caught a glimpse of Sybil dancing under her mother's portrait. It is most sad."

Arthur Crump had been patient and quiet throughout my account, although he had kept shaking his head. Now he opened his mouth indecently wide and then shut it dramatically. "You're both dotty," he said—"you and your grandmama. I've never heard such nonsense."

"Call it nonsense if you wish," I said haughtily, "but my brother, Jasper, was banned from the house for advocating that Sybil be exorcised." I did not add that Jasper's offenses had been many, including the use of the family superstition for his own nefarious purposes.

"That would have been a solution," Arthur said ironically. I coud see how he was thinking. In his opinion I was a harmless eccentric who was to be humored. "Why didn't your grandmother follow such good advice?"

"And exorcise a member of the family? The ghost of her own, dear, dead mother?" I exclaimed in horror.

"You've admitted that Sybil was a nuisance," Arthur continued.

"It would have been all right if she had only waltzed," I said, "but she had the habit of tossing small objects at people—often with considerable force as your own experience will attest."

"And why did she do that?" Arthur asked sarcastically. He had begun to walk towards the great hall and I had to follow him to keep him from upsetting the plans I had been forced to lay so hastily.

"Grandmama also said that Sybil thought she was throwing objects at the marquis, but that I doubt. In my opinion, Sybil would remember that it was her family's ill-will that had condemned her to exile with her vicious husband—and she would become irritated and throw things, even at strangers." Arthur

had gone through the door and I ran after him. "Where are you going?"

I found him on his knees examining the circle of footprints that stemmed from my grandmother's body. "I was just looking at these," he said. "They might have been caused by someone waltzing, you know."

"I thought at first that grandmother had been running frantically—possibly trying to escape someone," I said.

"An old lady with a bad heart running?" Arthur scoffed. "Or waltzing, for that matter. And whoever did this was waltzing; look at the long sliding prints that occur so frequently."

"I thought those places were where she had slipped and fallen," I said.

He shook his head. "I don't believe in ghosts," he said. "But I do believe some flesh-and-blood person was waltzing in this dust—but why?"

"I had to admit it too," I told him, "when I noticed that the prints were made by shoes—and grandmama's feet were bare."

We both looked at the body. Arthur saw that the feet, as I had said, were bare. They were also dusty from walking on the floor.

"I say! Her feet are dirty—and bare. Yet there are no footprints leading to the circle—or away."

"There are now," I said acidly.

"You mean there might have been others and we obliterated them?" he asked.

I nodded my head. "Not that it matters, if we don't call in the police. There's no need to, you see. Grandmama heard Sybil dancing and came to remonstrate with her. She suffered a heart attack and fell where she stood."

"But the footprints—or lack of them!" he protested.

"There may have been footprints that aren't there now," I said. I crossed my fingers behind my back. I had taken particular care to note whether there had been or not—and there had not.

"You mean you want me to believe the absurd idea that your grandmother was frightened to death by a ghost?" Arthur Crump cried. He was angry and frustrated and one point of his collar flapped as he waved his arms. I felt drawn to him

and sorry for him—and I liked him more than I had ever liked a man. Women like men they can bait.

"What other explanation is there?" I asked. "She was alone in the house. Only I had the key. We have evidence that Sybil was about earlier in the day when she threw the note at you. I'm sure Sybil meant no harm, but grandmama's heart was bad and she was given to sudden anger—it's really tragic."

"I don't believe in ghosts," Arthur said. "I won't believe in ghosts."

Neither did I, but at that moment I was not so sure. There must be a material explanation that would convince me how my grandmother, dressed in a scanty swimming suit, had walked halfway down a dusty hall without leaving a single footprint, while covering her feet with dust.

Or had Sybil finally settled an old score?

FOUR

THE DOOR SHUT heavily and I was left alone with the earthly remains of my grandmama in the great house.

I had sent Arthur to fetch Dr. Phillips, the family physician whose office was nearby. The young man had agreed promptly to my request and had left almost at once—a little too quickly for my peace of mind. I knew that there were many details of the complicated task that lay ahead of me which a lone woman would find difficult, not to say impossible, to complete with propriety. I would require Arthur Crump's assistance.

Had I had the time, I should have preferred to talk to him and to explain why it was not possible for me to call in the police. I would have admitted that I thought it probable that Ella had been murdered, sufficiently so that it was my intent to concentrate all my efforts on discovering the culprit. I would have told him more about our family and its tradition, that he might understand my scruples against publicity and official presumption. Murder is a private affair when the murdered and the murderer are members of the family.

I could not accept the explanation I had offered Arthur, which I doubted that he had believed, that my grandmama

had died of fright at the sight of the family specter. For one thing, I knew that Ella had not believed in Sybil's existence, although she had lent credence to the legend by repeating it and there had been several occasions in my childhood when the poltergeist had waltzed or had thrown small, breakable objects at one or another of us. I had reason to believe that Ella had fostered the superstition in my mother, my brother and sister, to divert their attention from other, more dreadful and calamitous family circumstances.

Grandmama was not responsible for Sybil's actions, however; this I fully believed. Nor had I any material explanation for apparently supernatural phenomena. It takes only a firm will and an objective intelligence, that instinctively rejects the apparent for the incontrovertible real, to face a seeming apparition and disregard. I was certain that Ella had been capable of confronting Sybil without falling dead of terror.

At the same time, grandmama had died and her death had been provoked by means unknown to me. The simple fact that she had been found in the middle of a dusty floor, her feet soiled with dust as if she had walked there but without any footprints leading to her body, pointed to some kind of prestidigitation for no good purpose. Then there was the matter of her attire: grandmama had never worn a swimming suit in her life and had she affected one she would not have chosen a Bikini. Some one had killed her and made it look as if the deed and been done by a ghost. It occurred to me that if I could find the answer to the question why the murderer had wanted his crime to appear to be a supernatural one, I would be close to knowing which of us had done in poor Ella.

That the killer was one of us I could not doubt. Only a Longstreet, or someone married to a Longstreet, would have a motive. All of us had been dependent on the old lady by the terms of the trust fund set up by Agatha and renewed by Ella. She had controlled the entire fortune of the Longstreets' —even I who had carried out her instructions for so many years could not say how much Ella had been worth—giving each of us only as much of the income as she deemed was deserved.

Her policy, even though I considered it to be eminently fair, had caused friction and resentment. My brother Jasper

is a spendthrift. He is only a few years older than myself, yet he has already been married three times and divorced twice. His first wife was a chorus girl, his second a ballet dancer and the present one is an artist who does huge, loathsome paintings and murals of contorted, headless nudes in the throes of the more elemental passions. A year ago Shirley Longstreet indulged an inclination for sculpture and at that time Jasper had written a series of nasty notes to grandmama, which I of course read before forwarding, demanding some thousands to buy marble. Grandmama had refused to advance any such sum and had directed me to inquire about other materials and their relative cost, eventually being generous to the extent of supplementing Jasper's regular income check by one hundred dollars with which Shirley could buy plaster of Paris. Since I had never seen any sculpture done by Jasper's wife, I deduce that he drank it up.

Maud is equally extravagant in my opinion, but her expenses come under the heading of medical and she has been more successful in extorting extra funds. As long as I can remember, my elder sister who is now nearing thirty has been visiting psychoanalysts. Her husband, Oliver Derwent, considers himself an inventor and spends his days and often his nights working in a loft studio on Greenwich Street. When I have been to the studio it has always been bare of any equipment, except a huge, sheeted object that rears itself in the center of the high room. Oliver is uncommunicative about his project and I must admit his demands for money have been modest and itemized—and Ella seldom reduced them.

My mother and her second husband, Edward Presscott, also have a way with money, a way of dissipating it. At that moment, I did not feel prepared to think of mama and Edward, their rows and scrapes, their messy life together. It is a subject that causes me humiliation and guilt enough without my wilfully lingering on it. Suffice it to say that all my relatives had a motive for murdering my grandparent and that motive was money. They did not know, as I did, that grandmama had made me sole beneficiary. They thought we would all inherit equally.

A month or more ago I received a bulky envelope from my grandmama. Inside I found a copy of an irrevocable trust agreement which Ella had entered into with one of the

older banks in the city some days earlier. The entire fortune, invested largely in sound securities, was to be held in trust by the bank. Income would be paid to my grandmama as long as she lived, but on her death it would automatically be paid to me. Only some personal possessions—"a few trinkets," my grandparent had written in the note that accompanied the copy of the agreement—would pass to the other members of my family by Ella's will. And I was instructed to dispose of any income which I did not need for my own purposes according to my discretion. In other words, grandmama passed the torch into my hands.

I could not blame my mother and step-father, Jasper and Maud and the others, for expecting to inherit sizable sums upon Ella's death. Since I had read all correspondence from my grandparent to the various members of the family—it had been Ella's habit to scribble notes which I transcribed in my own hand and addressed to the proper persons—I knew that from time to time Ella had dropped hints about what might happen if the family extravagances did not cease. Jasper would demand money and grandmama would direct me to pay him a fraction of what he had asked, while in her letter to him she might say, "For some time I have been increasingly aware that you lack the temperament to conserve your fortune, should you ever have one." I would smile as I copied out the words, seeing my brother's mouth gape open as he read them, his cigarette messily spilling ash upon the page that bore the scent of verbena because I like the odor and keep my stationery in a drawer with a sachet. Nor had Jasper been the only one to receive such warnings, that implied but did not promise rewards if habits were amended; each member of the family had read lines like these—and between them—more than once over the years.

The will would eventually be read and they would all learn that they would have to look to me in the future. They would not like it, but it would be for their own good. I intended to continue Ella's policies and to be fair to one and all. There was only one aspect of the situation that concerned me—on Ella's death I had become the family protector, although none of the family yet knew it; after they knew it, who would protect me?

I wanted to find which one of us had killed Ella because I

thought it was my responsibility—and also because I might be next. I did not think any of the others knew the conditions of the private trust agreement; if this was true they would not know until the will was read. I had a period of time in which I could carry on my own investigation, unworried by a thought of personal danger. But if I were right and someone in the family had murdered Ella, when that person discovered that only I stood between him and what he must consider his own, he might decide that I too would have to die. When the will was read, they would all discover that after my death the property was to be divided equally among them all—unless I should have left contrary instructions in a will of my own.

I might have a legal recourse, some method by which I could tie up the property even after my death and let the others know about it so that no one would rashly dispose of me as an impediment in his path to riches. I knew that to do anything of that sort, and do it fairly so that no one was favored, would take time; more time than I should have. I came back again to my original conclusion—I should have to be my own detective.

I might be wrong about the murderer being one of us, but I did not see how I could be. Had grandmama been bashed on the head and had there been evidence of illegal entry, a sprung door or a broken window, then I would have called in the police. Instead, all the circumstances pointed to a subtle and intelligent murderer who had thought out every move in advance. Only a member of the family would have known of the poltergeist and have put the legend to use. Only someone who had known grandmama would have been admitted to the house. There were the servants—Ella might have told one of them about Sybil—but evidently they had been discharged. I would have to question each of them. Again, the police would not be able to help me, but would only frighten Ella's old retainers. It was squarely up to me.

I had stood in the great hall, looking at the door Arthur had shut but not seeing it, for perhaps five minutes. I could excuse myself for this waste of precious time, since I had spent it in marshalling my thoughts and impressions; but I knew that each moment might count against me and the family. I sighed and turned about to walk briskly to the

circle of strange footprints where my poor, dead grandparent lay.

It had occurred to me that I might find it impossible to lift and carry the body, but this was not the case. Ella who had once been plump and attractive weighed lightly on my arms. I am tall and evenly proportioned myself, yet I marvelled at the body's lightness: although not a weakling I am equally not an Amazon. I carried the cold, stiffening form of what had been my grandmama up the staircase to her room with fair ease. I did have to lay my burden down a few times and I was breathing rapidly by the time I had placed the body where I intended that Dr. Phillips should find it—in my grandmother's bed.

It had not been my lot before that day to touch the flesh of a dead woman and I can feel the chill and the horror of what I had to do then, even now, I am not callous and I had loved and respected Ella. By the time I approached the closet in her bedroom seeking suitable raiment, my determination to hunt out whoever had been responsible for her death had grown into hatred and an uncivilized desire for revenge. If when I opened that closet door my eyes had fallen upon the murderer's face I know that I would have been able to kill him with my own hands. To kill *him?*—I remember that I thought *him,* but behind the thought lay the knowledge that the culprit might just as well have been a woman, my brother's current wife, my sister, even my mother.

What I saw when I opened the door of the closet was a shock, although I did not see the face of the murderer. The closet was bare and clean, glistening clean, unlike the rest of the disused house. There were no clothes hanging on the racks, no clothes at all, except a shroud. It hung in the dark, empty space like the image of death itself.

I reached for it angrily and as I took the thin stiff of it between my fingers for the first time I had the sense of a presence peering over my shoulder, an evil intelligence that had planned a macabre charade and had allotted me a role to play, and was now watching my performance critically, ready to carp at imperfections. I whirled about, as if to catch an actual spy, only to see the bedroom, the four-poster bed and the frail body resting upon it, like a shadow upon a cloud.

My fingers clenched and crushed the shroud and my own

body grew rigid as another spasm of hate possessed me. Greed, I thought, greed and no law—worse than that, no love. It was then I knew that there is love in hate, that I was drawn to the author of this crime as I might be drawn to a lover, not irresistibly, strongly, but willingly—collusively.

Later, I threw the swimming suit down the laundry chute.

The first part, the horrible part, of my immediate task was done. When Dr. Phillips arrived at the house he would see my grandmother's body decently attired. I would tell him that I had not been in touch with her for some time and, growing concerned, I had decided to visit her and had come upon her dead. It woud be the truth and it would enable the doctor, who was an old family friend, to write a death certificate in good conscience.

I also wanted to clean the floor of the main hall. The doctor would have noticed the dust on the parquetry and he might have asked embarrassing questions; besides, I did not want anyone else to see that part of the house in such a condition.

There were a large broom and a dustpan in the kitchen but I could not find a vacuum cleaner. I knew that my grandmother had purchased one some years back since I had carried on the negotiations. If I had looked farther I might have found the vacuum cleaner. As it was, Dr. Phillips would be arriving shortly and I had to work as quickly as I could.

An apron over my dress and a clean rag I had found in the broom closet around my reddish-gold curls, I set to work on the most laborious job I had undertaken in some time. The dust was thick and it did not seem to be ordinary dust; I accumulated a great amount of it quickly and had to make frequent trips back to the kitchen to dispose of it. Even so, I kept at the job, raising a fog of dust as I thrust back and forth with the broom, holding my finger to my nose to keep from sneezing. I wondered as I worked if I were not stirring up more than I cleaned, although I knew from the amount I threw away that this could not have been so.

Then, when I had just finished my task, I heard a scurrying sound at the head of the stairs. I laid down the broom and dustpan and stood listening. I heard another sound, a snuf-

fling, as if an animal—a large dog perhaps—were nosing about in the upstairs corridor.

I decided to investigate. I climbed the stairs slowly, pausing every few steps and listening, so as not to put whoever or whatever was making that noise on guard. Sometimes I would not hear it. Then I would think that I had imagined the sound and that my nerves were giving way. I would hesitate, trying to convince myself that I did not have to finish my climb, that there was nothing out of order at the head of the stairs. But I could not convince myself. I had heard the sound and there might be, there probably was, something badly wrong.

Each time, before I had completed the curious argument I was carrying on with myself, I would hear the sound again. It was a snuffling rather than a groaning, but it had another characteristic that I could not define. I might best describe this other quality by saying that if an animal made its particular noise aspirately, by coughing and spluttering through its nose and throat perhaps, and at the same time clearly attempted to communicate as a human might, then this was the kind of sound that had arrested my attention.

I reached the upstairs hall without seeming to come any closer to whatever was snuffling. I began to walk down the hall slowly and then stopped at a pathetic sight. Two gnawed crusts of old bread lay at my feet. The pieces of bread looked like filth and I touched them gingerly with my finger, not knowing them for what they were. I picked one up and I saw where it had been chewed, possibly *gummed* is a more accurate term, quite recently. And the crusts were warm, as though they had been clutched possessively by pitiful hands.

My face felt hot and tears burned in my eyes, clouding my vision. I ran blindly down the hall, colliding with objects, determined to catch the owner of the stale crumbs. For a tantalizing moment the snuffling sound was closer—and in that moment I realized that whoever was making the sound was not trying to talk, but to hum. The poor creature was desperately attempting the lilt of a Strauss waltz, the same Strauss waltz of which Sybil had been reputed to be so fond—"Tales from the Vienna Woods."

I fell against the bannister of the narrow, twisting back

stairs and had to grasp for the rail to keep from plunging down; as it was, I wrenched my side. But as I sprawled off balance I did see in the dark well of the stairs a bent hulk scrabbling on all fours for the crusts that had flown from my hand and had fallen below. Then, as I watched, the form scurried off, merging into the shadows at the foot of the stairs with the cunning of the wild.

"Claude!" I cried hoarsely, holding back a sob; "Claude!"

I pulled myself erect, ignoring the sharp pain in my side. I meant to follow—to find out where he had gone.

The door bell rang, jangling loudly up the stairwell from the kitchen where it was located. That will be Dr. Phillips, I thought. I must look presentable—as if nothing were wrong.

I walked back along the hall to the great staircase and descended it slowly, as the doorbell pealed a second time.

FIVE

A MAN STOOD upon the threshold and, as I hesitated, crossed it: a man whom I had never seen before. He was tall and past his youth, not so much large as lean; but his spare, hunched shoulders gave me a sense of power carefully contained. He was dressed soberly in a dark suit that was well cut. His face was as long and lean as his body and his mouth was set firmly above his slab of a chin. I gave way before him, although his smile was mannerly.

"You will forgive my intrusion, Miss Longstreet," the man said with assurance, removing his hat as he spoke. "You are Miss Longstreet, aren't you? I am Deputy Chief Inspector Stephen Eliot."

"I had not expected a policeman," I said. I did not smile.

His eyes were brown, flecked with gold; they made me think of agates. His nose was ungainly in length, although even and straight. "Somehow I hadn't thought you would. It isn't always good technique, you know, to be expected."

"But what can your business be?" I asked. "You come at an inopportune, not to say a tragic time—a time of sorrow. If it can wait—"

He was not regarding me, but looking round him at the great hall and the rows of pictures with their backs showing

—at the masterly sweep of the staircase. "Like everyone else," he was saying, "I'll admit to having been a bit of a country boy about this place. I've passed it on the street many times, you know—and wondered what was inside. So this is it."

"Yes," I said sarcastically, "this is it." The man's confidence annoyed me and I had a careless desire to topple it. "As I was saying, if your business could wait—"

"As you were saying, Miss Longstreet, 'this is an inopportune time'—you said something of the sort, didn't you? You also said, I do believe I heard you—'a tragic time, a time of sorrow'." He looked at me then, turning his large head slowly as if the mechanism that moved it had to struggle with a cumbersome weight. I saw that one of his eyebrows quivered slightly.

"My grandmother died this afternoon," I told him.

He gave no sign of sympathy, "Aah! That would be the old lady, the one they say shut herself up in this place so many years ago?"

"I do not know what 'they' say, Mr. Eliot. My grandmother liked seclusion. She detested publicity and most of the other concomitants of the modern world. I do not think she would have approved of a policeman paying her granddaughter a visit upon the very day of her bereavement."

He smiled at me and passed a gloved hand—proper gloves without too much stitching—over his chin. "Testy," he said. "Yes, you're testy. I wonder why?"

"Could it be that I am not accustomed to being asked impertinent questions at such a time?" I said.

He nodded his head, giving me the distinct impression that he agreed with me. "A policeman's life is not a happy one," he drawled. "Did your grandmother die a natural death?"

"She had attained a great age," I said. "Death was inevitable."

"Of course, you have a death certificate?" he parried.

"Dr. Phillips, the family physician, is on his way," I told him. I had become wary of his inquisitiveness, but I did not see how I could refuse to respond. I decided to be equable and maintain my distance.

"Aren't you going to ask me to sit down?" he said next. "If the doctor hasn't seen the body, I'll have to await his verdict."

"I do not see why," I said, "but I have nothing to hide. You may come into the drawing room—the other rooms on this floor haven't been used recently."

He followed me into the back drawing room and, before I could prevent him, sat in grandmama's ladder-backed chair. I stayed on my feet. "It's a gloomy place," he remarked—"a veritable cave."

"It made no difference to grandmama," I said. "She was blind."

He rested his head in his hand and I saw he wore a massive gold ring. "So I've heard," he said. "So I've heard. You were fond of your grandmother?"

"I was the only member of the family whom she trusted," I replied.

Inspector Eliot let his hand fall into his capacious lap. He sat uncomfortably straight with his legs spread before him like a pair of dividers—his arm now spanned the distance between his legs, forming a small triangle. "I've heard that too," he said. "They say you were Mrs. Longstreet's only contact with the outside world."

I explained to him that grandmama had used me to carry out her wishes concerning the rest of the family. I did not tell him about the trust fund Ella had established. He nodded his head from time to time, irritating me more each time.

"How long did you serve Mrs. Longstreet in this—in this —er, capacity?" he asked.

"Since I was fifteen," I said.

His eyebrow quivered again. "And you're how old now?"

"I do not reveal my age."

Stephen Eliot chuckled. "Not more than your middle twenties, daresay. It is a woman's prerogative, howsomever. Uh-hmn. Fifteen was fairly young to take on such responsibilities, wasn't it?"

"Grandmama did not think so. Her lawyer saw to all legal matters and advised me—I believe, officially, he was my guardian."

Eliot's brown eyes had not blinked for what seemed an age. As I watched, the tiny gold flecks appeared to swim about dizzily. It was not the time to faint I told myself. I looked away from the man's eyes and saw that he had

brought a large, clumsy notebook from a pocket of his coat. "Can you give me the name of the chap?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I want the name of your lawyer—to check a thing or two."

"What right have you—" I began, and then thought to wait him out. I gave him the name of Benson Sylvester and the name of his firm.

"When did you last see your grandmama?" he asked while writing down Sylvester's address.

"I haven't seen grandmama since I was fifteen years old—until today." My voice threatened to break. I had to swallow to keep back the tears.

"Then it's true that the old lady cut herself off from her family?" he asked.

This time I had to say it, even if Eliot did represent authority. "I don't understand what gives you the right to ask me questions on the day of my grandmother's death. It is not as if there had been a crime."

Stephen Eliot glanced up quickly. His dark eyes were wide and startled. "Who said there had been a crime?"

"That is exactly my point," I answered. "There has not been any. An aged woman, my grandmother, has died unexpectedly. I do not see why I have to submit to your badgering."

"Tell me," he said. He laid his notebook face down and open across his straddled legs. "Tell me this. If you hadn't seen your grandmother, or visited this house, in all those years, how'd you know to come here today?"

"My grandmother sent me a note requesting my assistance." I saw no reason to tell him of the circuitous route that note had traveled. If he deduced that grandmama had used the mails, he would not be able later to say I said so.

Eliot wrote furiously in his notebook for a disconcerting length of time. If he had taken down every word I had said it should not have taken him half as long. "And when you arrived at the house?"

"My grandmother was dead."

"Uh-hmn. How'd you get in?"

"I had keys. Grandmother had sent me keys a few months back."

"She expected that she might fall ill and need you?"

"She was getting on in years."

"What about the servants?"

"I cannot answer that question. There were none here when I arrived today—a perplexing fact. I can think of only one explanation." I told him about Mabel's accusation against grandmother which I had once thought groundless.

"Most interesting," he said when I had finished. He shut his notebook and stuffed it back into his pocket. "Tell me. Tell me about the rest of your family."

I did not know what this man was getting at, but I had decided that the simplest and quickest way to get him out of the house was to pretend candor and answer all his pointless questions. "There is Jasper," I began, wondering to myself why I had thought first of Jasper.

"Tall chap?" Eliot asked. "Not to say willowy? Walks a bit sidewise, much like a crab? Wears Norfolk jackets and smokes turkish cigarettes through a holder?" His tone was matter of fact and he had nearly shut his eyes.

"That would be Jasper. He is only a year older than I."

"You fight like cats and dogs?"

"How did you know that?"

"You said he was only a year older than you. It always happens."

I had to smile. "Grandmama liked Jasper least of all, I think," I said. "His extravagance had something to do with it—but then my sister is also extravagant. I do not quite know why I should tell you all this."

"I'm safe as houses. Keeping secrets is my business."

"Well, Jasper tried to force grandmama's hand more than once. He did petty, malicious things—"

"He told tales out of school?"

"Well, more than that. I remember once—" I stopped when I saw that Eliot had held up his hand.

"I've enough about Jasper. Got him tagged. Tell me about the others."

"My sister, Maud," I said. Again I stopped, when I saw he had held up his hand again.

"Jasper has a wife?" he asked.

"Oh my yes. Her name is Shirley. She is his third wife. He

divorced the other two. Shirley is an artist. She is rather tall—"

"She has a good figure, but dresses in skirts and sweaters? Long brown hair cut in a sort of a bob? Walks with a big stride like a man? Swears like a man too?"

"That would be Shirley. I really don't know too much about her, except to say I don't like her. And I am not at all sure I should be talking with you like this."

Eliot waved his hand languidly. "You won't regret it," he said. "Honesty is the best policy."

"Then there is Maud," I said. "She is my elder sister—nearing thirty now. Sometimes I have almost let myself like Maud—"

"She is a big girl? Plain, but does up well? Has your hair, but not your eyes? Keeps an Afghan on a long chain? Has a husband half her size?"

"You must have seen her," I said. "Maud can be extravagant too. She and grandmama didn't get on, because Maud insists on being independent. I think her latest fad is dianetics. She has 'cleared' her husband."

"He's nothing much," the Inspector said. "He has wistful blue eyes and smokes a pipe because somebody told him it was manly? Wears suede shoes and loud sports jackets? Always walks behind his wife?"

I contented myself with nodding my head. Eliot did not need me to tell him about the Longstreets. It was clear that he had made a study of us already.

He noticed my silence, but he did nothing about it. After a while he took a cigar from a pigskin case, snipped its end with a tiny gold guillotine he carried on his key chain and inserted the cigar in his mouth. He did not light it.

"There are also mother—and my step-father," I said at last.

"Ah, yes."

"I surmise you know that we do not get on?"

"Your mother is still a beautiful woman, even if she does dye her hair blue? Wears a sable cape and drives a Jaguar Super-sports? Drinks a bit too much, but carries it well? Likes to talk to herself?"

I shook my head. "That is not herself she talks to," I said. "She talks to her control—a young boy who was killed in the war."

"Your step-father doesn't believe in spiritualism?"

"Presscott doesn't believe in anything," I said. "There are only two things in the world that interest him, women and money. He married my mother because he had heard she would be independently wealthy when grandmama died."

"And will she be?" Eliot asked casually.

"I do not know," I told him. "It is possible. None of us will know until Sylvester reads the will."

"Who is Arthur Crumb?" He asked me this question in precisely the same tone he had used in all the others.

"Crump," I said. "I made the same mistake when I first met him. He is a young man I know." I had been feeling uneasy for some time, but now I wondered if I had not been fatuous.

"You're a very pretty liar, Miss Longstreet. It hasn't been fair of me to catch you out. You are offended—I can see that—but it won't do you any good." The Inspector had stood as he said this because the doorbell had rung. "No, don't go to the door. It's not your Dr. Phillips—it's the assistant medical examiner. You see, Miss Longstreet, I know more than you think. I know your grandmother died under suspicious circumstances, if she wasn't murdered."

Eliot walked from the room and I could hear his footsteps echoing as he crossed the great hall to answer the door. His sudden accusation had left me shaken. I had thought that I was succeeding in my plan, but now I knew that there must be more involved in the death of my grandparent than I had previously realized. How had the police force become interested in the Longstreet family? My immediate suspicion was that Arthur Crump had gone to the police instead of to Dr. Phillips as I had instructed him, but on reconsideration this seemed hardly credible.

If a policeman or an ordinary detective had come to investigate, then I would have felt surer that it was Arthur's doing. But Arthur had been gone less than an hour; unless he had connections with the police commissioner, which I thought most doubtful, it was unlikely that any word from him had resulted in the call paid me by a deputy chief inspector. For the time being I could only accept the fact that I, as well as the other members of the family, had come to the attention and under the surveillance of Stephen Eliot. It

was a comfortless fact, but I pride myself on my ability to face facts.

The immediate question was how to respond to Eliot's accusation. He was a subtle man of some intelligence and he had left my presence to give me time to recover. He had called my bluff and now I had to decide how much I could safely tell him, without jeopardizing the reputation of the family. I could not tell him all, of course: the problem was to give him just enough information in a way that would persuade him that I was withholding nothing.

I am not a person who can plan each detail of a course of action in advance. I prefer to lay down the general lines and then to improvise according to the occasion. Even had I wished to contemplate every word I should say, I could not have done so. I could hear men talking in the hall and then going up the stairway; shortly afterwards I heard them walking back and forth in the rooms above. It was distracting. How had they known that my grandmother's body would be upstairs? Then I reassured myself—if Stephen Eliot had no knowledge to the contrary, he would have assumed that Ella had died in bed. Bedrooms were seldom on the ground floor.

I had composed myself and I trust that I presented a pleasant and phlegmatic expression when the Inspector returned to the drawing room. He held his unlighted cigar in his hand, having stopped several paces from where I stood, and he regarded it for a long moment, his fingers testing its resilience, before he raised his eyes to look at me.

"Who is this Arthur Crump?" he asked.

I had not expected him to repeat that question and I shall admit that it flustered me. "Why—why," I said, "he is a young man I know. An editor, I believe."

"You've known him a long time?"

"Why—I—"

"Don't you think you had better tell me the truth from now on, Miss Longstreet?" Inspector Eliot's manner had grown severe and I am afraid I bridled. I am not used to being spoken to so brusquely.

He did not appear to notice that I had taken umbrage. "Isn't it a fact that you only met Arthur Crump today?"

"How did you know that?" I said in surprise.

He seemed undecided as to whether to tell me. I did not say anything further and at length he spoke. "One of my men saw Arthur Crump loitering in front of this house at a quarter after eleven this morning. He walked slowly past and then retraced his steps, stopping every few yards to look into the grounds. As he neared the gate something white struck him on the head. My man saw Crump clasp his temple, look about him and then stoop to pick up the object that had fallen at his feet. He glanced at it and then set off, walking rapidly for a side street where he had parked his car. My man contacted another of my assistants who followed the car to drugstore where, after double-parking, Crump entered and perused a telephone book. He returned to his car within a few minutes and drove at once to the building in which you live." Eliot paused and thrust the cigar into his mouth. "Crump left your building in about half-an-hour, but stayed in his car watching the entrance. When you came out and drove away, your friend followed you. My man followed you both to this house."

"May I ask how it happened that my grandmother's residence was being watched by the police?" I asked. I tried not to be hesitant and to speak clearly. I told myself that I had done nothing wrong and consequently had nothing to fear.

Eliot nodded his head. "This section in which your grandmother resided is one that contains many wealthy homes. It is well patrolled. The department has known of your grandmother's many years' seclusion and the policemen and patrol cars in this precinct have come to regard with suspicion anyone who loiters near the grounds. Tradesmen have left their parcels in the box by the servants' entrance and sometimes a servant has been seen to leave the grounds. Other than that there has been little or no traffic in or out of the mansion in a decade or more."

"It has been more," I said smiling. "It is good to know that the police have been alert."

"I wonder if you mean that," Eliot said. Before I could answer his speculation, he went on. "When this morning early, one person after another approached the main gate, unlocked it, entered the house and then returned within short intervals, I ordered several of my assistants to note the

arrivals and departures and to follow anyone who behaved suspiciously."

I must have gasped. It had not occurred to me that, instead of being the first visitor the great house had had in many years, I had been only one of a number. "You have a complete list of everyone who visited grandmother this morning?" I asked.

"I fancy so," Eliot said. "The officer on duty happened to be making a routine call to the stationhouse from the box down the street when you arrived, Miss Longstreet. His curiosity was aroused and he lingered. When you rushed out, barely a minute later, and ran down the street, your skirts caught up high in your hands—as if, he ventured to say, 'the very devil were after you'—he reported the matter to the desk sergeant and eventually the matter came to me. I sent my assistants to the house at once and they relieved Officer McHugh who had stayed by the call box to keep an eye on things."

I was dumbstruck. If I had understood the man correctly, he had said that I had been the first to visit the house—and that at a time hours before Arthur Crump had appeared in my apartment with the note in his hand. I could not believe my ears and I said as much.

"Officer McHugh positively identified the woman he saw enter the house at nineteen minutes past nine o'clock this morning—and who ran off down the avenue shortly thereafter—as you," Eliot said crisply.

"How could he know me?" I asked.

"While my assistant was waiting for Arthur Crump to reappear outside your building this noon, he telephoned me to make a routine report. I foresaw that any message Crump brought to you might induce you to visit these premises and I suggested to Officer McHugh that he return to this neighborhood. From his earlier description of the attire of the woman who ran away, I surmised she might be you. And when you arrived, Officer McHugh identified you."

"What was his description of the woman who ran away?" I asked.

"Good point," the Inspector conceded. "Fine point. He described the woman as tall, reddish-blonde hair, dressed oddly in a long skirt and a blouse with exaggerated shoulders.

He said she looked like a Gibson Girl." Eliot glanced at my feet. "McHugh also said she wore high-buttoned shoes and clocked stockings."

Thoughtlessly, I tucked my feet under my skirt and patted the leg-of-mutton shoulders of my blouse. The policeman had described my style of dress—I prefer the more womanly fashions of a more gracious era—with fair accuracy. But I said, "Another woman could have dressed like me."

Eliot slowly shook his head. "I've thought of that. I don't think so. Not too many women have access to your sort of clothes. Damn few have your hair—and a key to the Longstreet mansion. You, yourself, have identified all the other visitors this morning as members of the family. Why should this one woman be a stranger? No, Miss Longstreet, you had better come clean. Tell me—do tell me, why did you come to this house this morning?"

"Why don't you ask the other members of the family that same question?" I asked. I was confused. I had not known when I described Jasper and the others that the Inspector was using my descriptions to check against those of his assistants. I was puzzled as to why my other relatives had visited grandmama that morning and how they had obtained keys; I had thought I had the only keys. More than that, I did not understand why anyone had bothered to impersonate me.

"I intend to question the other members of your family, Miss Longstreet," the Inspector said gravely, "But since you are the one most deeply implicated in your grandmother's death—" He let his sentence hang unfinished.

"I did not leave the house this morning," I told him. "If I had, I certainly wouldn't have visited grandmama without an invitation."

"But you did visit your grandmother this afternoon, after seeing young Crump?" the Inspector reminded me.

"Mr. Crump brought me a note." I fished in my bag for the slip of notepaper. "It had been crumpled about my grandmother's wedding ring." I handed Eliot both the note and the ring. "I knew it came from Ella because I recognized the handwriting," I added.

Inspector Stephen Eliot read the note, then held it close to his face and studied it. "I expected something of the sort,"

he said with the complacency that I had yet to jar. "And how did Crump say he came by this?"

"It struck him on the head. Your man reported the same thing, so it must be so."

"Ah, yes. Tell me, Miss Longstreet, in your experience was your grandmother the type that throws melodramatic messages from windows at innocent passersby?"

"Certainly not," I replied with some asperity. "Grandmama had manners."

Stephen Eliot thrust the note and the ring into his pocket without my leave. "You have witnesses, of course, to prove you were at your home between the hours of nine and ten this morning?"

"Why," I said. "Danvers—" I stopped and remained silent. Danvers did her shopping between nine and ten because I am a late riser. There was cook, but cook would have been in the kitchen—I could have gone and come without her knowing. Fortunately, I was given some time to answer. A small, plump man with a bald head and sharp grey eyes behind horn-rimmed glasses had bustled into the room. He carried a black leather satchel which he dropped onto the floor unceremoniously—it was badly scuffed from such ill-treatment. He began speaking at once. "Might be a natural death, Inspector—then again, you can never tell. Like to put her on the slab, if you can get permission."

If I had understood the plump man correctly—I took him to be the assistant medical examiner of whom Inspector Eliot had spoken—he was proposing to perform a post-mortem analysis upon my poor grandmother's body. I am not superstitious, but I share the opinion of Antigone concerning the desecration of the dead. I would refuse my permission.

Eliot had disregarded me. "What about time of death?" he asked the doctor.

"Hard to say with such an old party. Last six hours, say. Maybe little more or less."

The inspector pulled a thin platinum watch from his vest. "It is now twenty-five minutes past three," he announced. "Then she would have died at twenty-five minutes past nine?"

"Could be. But that's cutting it pretty fine," the medical examiner said. "Can I get permission to do a post-op?"

Eliot glanced at me. He did not speak. I took it he was being tactful.

"Certainly not," I said firmly.

Eliot walked to me and looked at me steadily. The gold flecks glinted in his dark eyes. "You may want some time before you say finally."

"I have given you my decision."

Eliot's face remained impassive. He was not unkind, nor kind, simply objective. "I haven't told you that when I left you alone, I checked with your lawyer, Mr. Sylvester. He mentioned the fact that you were sole beneficiary to the bulk of Ella Longstreet's estate under the terms of a recent, and irrevocable, trust."

"I am surprised, and displeased, by his indiscretion."

"If it should turn out that your grandmother was murdered," Eliot went on, "you would be a prime suspect. And if you refused to allow a post-mortem before it was clear that a murder had been committed, it would not look well to a grand jury. I advise you to permit the analysis."

"I have given you my decision," I said.

Eliot put his hand upon the medical examiner's shoulder. "It takes consent of only one relative, Dr. Henderson," he said. "And there are other relatives."

"All of whom visited grandmama this morning," I reminded him.

Stephen Eliot stroked his jaw, "Any one of whom could have murdered her, you mean," he said thoughtfully. "But none of whom, my clever Miss Longstreet, went to the pains you did to shield a poltergeist."

He turned to the medical examiner. "Tell me, Dr. Henderson, could the body you examined have died of fright?"

SIX

"WINDOW DRESSING!" INSPECTOR ELIOT announced. "Plagued window dressing!"

He sat in my grandmother's chair and tested the tea left in the cup with his forefinger. He was idly pushing the slice of lemon about, creating a tempest. "I've never seen a case with so much window dressing."

The medical examiner had left, after having given his opinion that Ella could have died of fright. "Heart failure," he had said—"if that was the cause of death and, mind you, I'm not saying without a post mortem—could conceivably be induced by terror." Stephen Eliot had thanked the doctor and had sent for Arthur Crump. "He's been waiting outside with one of my assistants," the Inspector had said, "since I had thought it best to talk with you alone."

Arthur had thrown me an embarrassed glance when he entered the room. I had evaded his eyes and ever since then he had been trying to capture my attention. I could guess that he had walked into Eliot and his assistants and it had not been his fault that my plan to keep grandmama's death in the family had fallen through. Even so, from the fact that Eliot had used the word *poltergeist,* I gathered that Arthur had perhaps talked more freely than had been necessary.

"Had you noticed this cup of tea?" Eliot asked me, breaking into my thoughts. "And this cigarette stub in the ashtray?"

I agreed that I had, saying, "The tea was still barely warm when I first saw it."

"And when was that?" Eliot's tone was less peremptory now that his deceptive questions had left me without pretense, or so he thought.

"I did not look at my watch," I said.

"It was about one o'clock—possibly five minutes after," Arthur said. He stuffed his hands in his pockets as if he did not know what to do with them.

"How do you know?" Eliot asked him.

"I remember looking at that clock." Arthur nodded at grandmama's clock in its ormulu case that stood on the marble mantlelpiece.

The Inspector withdrew his own watch from his pocket and checked the timepiece on the mantel. "It's accurate," he said. As if my grandmother would allow a clock in her house that did not keep perfect time!

Eliot raised his eyes to the ceiling and began to describe a circle with the toe of one foot. "Uh-hmn," he said. "Even if it had been piping hot when served, it could barely have set an hour—more likely half an hour—if it still retained some warmth. What do you make of that?" He asked his question of me.

"I should say the slightly warm cup of tea indicated that my grandmother had been alive at noon—or shortly afterwards," I told him.

"She was alive enough at fifteen minutes past eleven," Arthur said—"that's when I was hit on the head by her note."

The Inspector jiggled his foot more rapidly. "I'd say not, you know. Miss Longstreet and I are in agreement that her grandmother would not have tossed that note at a stranger. That, I'd say, is more of the window dressing. What d'you make of this, Miss Longstreet?" he inquired, his eyes turning slowly to my face. He held the bit of cigarette butt in between his fingers.

"It would be my deduction that my grandmother had a visitor, who refused tea but smoked a cigarette—and that shortly after the cigarettte was snubbed out, she died."

"And that I'd say is exactly what the murderer—if there's been a murder—wants you to think. Stage setting! Damfool props! You heard what the medical examiner said. Ella Longstreet died six hours ago."

"I do not seek wheels within wheels," I said. "I also remember that the assistant medical examiner was somewhat chary of the precise time of death. And didn't he say that it was always difficult to judge in such an old person?"

Eliot scowled. "Good point! But it would be a hard one to make stand up in court. Still—even you will admit—she probably died before noon?"

"On what little I know, I can only say that I do not know." I was eager for him to stop playing about with inconsequentials. He did not value my opinion about the tea cup and the cigarette butt. It was only a delaying tactic to sharpen the edge of Arthur's and my own anxiety about what he would ask us next. I found myself wishing that Stephen Eliot would be blunt and dogmatic, rather than suave and jesuitical.

My wish was soon granted. Inspector Eliot planted his feet firmly upon the rug and sighted his eyes down his long nose, first at Arthur and then at me. "You tell different stories about where the body was found," he said. "I don't like that. You, Miss Longstreet, said you found your grandmother dead in her bed."

"I said she had died a natural death."

"Which is to imply she died in bed. But Crump, here,

claims you found her lying in a bathing suit in the dust. He says she was lying there in the hall—the body, I mean—and that the soles of the feet were dutsy, but there were no footprints in the dust leading up to the body. He also tells me some nonsense about a circle of footprints around the body. He says you told him that someone named Sybil had been waltzing. Sybil, I am given to understand, is a poltergeist." Eliot whistled sharply between his teeth and his eyebrow flew up as if in pain. "Now who am I to believe? Uh-hmn."

"Mr. Crump has a very literal mind," I said. I felt I had to save the situation. "He has described the circumstances in which I found my grandmother's body truthfully enough. He has repeated a family legend which I told him—but that I hadn't intended him to take seriously."

"Legend? This business about the poltergeist? Tell me."

I gave him a full account of Sybil D'Yvetot and the family superstitions that had arisen about her. When I had finished I went on to say—"It was not my desire to mislead Mr. Crump, but only to let him know that someone had wanted us to believe that Sybil had appeared to grandmama."

Inspector Eliot gave me a curt nod of his head. "Sound reasoning. Someone, somebody who knew about the family apparition, wanted to throw dust in our eyes."

"I have been thinking a good deal about it," I said, "and I consider it probable that one of the other members of the family discovered Ella dead this morning. For reasons of his own, this person wanted her death to look like a violent one, possibly even murder. He hit upon the circle of footprints as a way of making it seem that Sybil had shown herself to grandmama. Perhaps even the cup of tea and the cigarette butt were meant to serve a similar purpose."

Arthur Crump was fumbling with his pipe. Once he looked as if he were about to speak, but then he did not. Eliot was still regarding me and I could not tell if he had accepted what I had said.

"Miss Longstreet, you are ingenious. I'm not saying that you are wrong, but I admire your guile. But you haven't explained to me why you went to the trouble of cleaning the hall, of carrying the body upstairs and dressing it in a shroud?"

I did not answer. I had an answer ready, but I felt it best

to appear as if I had to think over what he had said. Eliot was a subtle man who mistrusted glibness.

"Unless Crump is lying, and I think not," the Inspector went on, "you must've done something like that. The hall was clean when I first set foot in it. The body was lying on the bed dressed in a shroud."

"I could not leave her lying there indecent," I said. "I felt a filial horror of letting anyone else's eye fall upon her shame. And I knew what a sensation the newspapers would make of the body's semi-nudity, if it got out." I managed a quaver in my voice to help convince him of my sincerity.

Stephen Eliot's face showed no expression, nor had he taken his eyes off me. "Come now, Miss Longstreet, you must've realized that—if your grandmother had been murdered—you were destroying evidence?"

"The thought that she might have been murdered didn't cross my mind." As I said this I saw Arthur give a start and then quickly turn away so that the Inspector would not sense his surprise. "There were no marks on her body. I knew she had a heart condition for which she had refused treatment. I shall admit that I was shocked by finding her in such a state, but my first impulse was to put her properly to bed and to clothe her poor body." Tears filled my eyes and the room glimmered; the Inspector's face grew amorphous and vague.

"I know it distresses you to talk about your grandmother's death so soon after you found her, Miss Longstreet," Eliot said kindly. It was the first time I had noted warmth in his voice and it gave me to hope. "But you have brought much of the suspicion, in which I must hold anything you say, on yourself. Innocent persons don't destroy evidence and then lie about it." He had ended by being sterner than ever.

"I am telling you the truth," I said. "Ask Mr. Crump if I am not." I did not look at the young man for fear of what I might see on his face. He knew that the thought of murder had occurred to me, that it had been I who had led him up the garden path with the tale of Sybil and had sent him out of the house while I removed the footprints from the hall.

He did nobly by me. "I can confirm what Miss Longstreet has said," he declared. "She was shocked at finding her grandmother's body and fainted. I discovered her unconscious. We didn't speak of murder."

"Uh-hmn," Eliot said, rolling his cigar gently between his fingers. "Where did you get the shroud, Miss Longstreet?" he asked me. "They aren't usually to be found in the wardrobes of even old and wealthy ladies."

I shuddered as I remembered the sight of the dark, empty closet, the single, ghostly garment hanging like a deathly cloud—and it seemed to me that the inimical presence that I had felt watching me over my shoulder stood behind me again. It was almost as if I could feel cold breath on the nape of my neck.

"The shroud was hanging in the closet of my grandmother's room," I said, fighting the desire to look around and see what was behind me. I knew nothing, nobody, was behind me.

"But why did you choose to clothe the body in the shroud? I know it was most suitable, but also most suspicious. Had your grandmother died in her bed, as you apparently wanted your Dr. Phillips to believe, she would have been wearing a nightdress, wouldn't she?" Eliot's dark-eyed gaze persevered and again I saw the bright flecks in his pupils begin to swirl as I struggled against faintness. It would not do to faint—it would be damning.

"The shroud was the only article of clothing left," I said, "except for the scant swimming suit on her poor body. Everything else was gone."

Stephen Eliot hunched forward in his chair, his hands come to life and clasping his knees tensely. It was the first time I had seen him surprised out of his complacency and it made me feel I had gained a point in our duel. "Why didn't you mention this before?" he asked.

"I was not given the chance. It was not that I intended to withhold information."

Arthur Crump looked at me strangely, a half-smile upon his face. He seemed pleased by what I had said and he wanted me to know. I did not answer his look, but gave my full attention to the Inspector.

"What do you think the absence of any other clothing means?" Eliot asked softly, as if he were musing aloud. "And what did you do with the swimming suit?"

"I put it in the laundry. There's a chute at the back of the second floor hall that ends in a bin in the basement. One of your assistants will find it there, I am sure, if he looks."

I hesitated and breathed deeply. I had not made up my mind how to answer his question about the missing clothes. But he was waiting for me to go on and I knew that I should not hesitate too long.

"I shall admit I don't know what to make of grandmama's clothes being missing," I said, "except to say that it seems to fit in with the other parts of what has happened—what you call the 'window dressing.' "

"Uh-hmn. Go on. Tell me more," Inspector Eliot said. Arthur Crump had lit his pipe again and was smoking nervously. I wished he would sit down. His restless pacing bothered me.

"I do not know exactly what I mean," I said, feeling my pulse quicken as I realized that I was speaking without forethought, saying the first things that came into my mind. "But it does seem all to be of a piece. First, Mabel—she was grandmama's parlormaid—visits me and tells me that grandmama is dismissing the servants one by one. I do not believe her at the time. I think that she is making up a story to cover her lack of reference and I wonder what she has done to be discharged without a reference. That was not Ella's way—"

"When did this happen?" Eliot asked. "I want to get the time sequence straight."

"Two months ago at the most."

"Say, the end of March?"

"It might have been in April. I really do not remember exactly. At the time there was no reason why I should—I was only annoyed."

Eliot nodded his head. "That's probably close enough. We'll say the end of March or the first week of April. Then what came next?"

"Well, on the second of May—I know it was then because the circumstance was so unusual I noted the date—grandmama sent me the keys. They came in an envelope with a short letter asking me to call at Mr. Sylvester's office about a business matter. The letter made no reference to the keys—a fact I thought queer."

Eliot placed the cigar, which he had been handling for an hour or more but had not lighted, in the ashtray. I saw that the end was chewed to ribbons. It was as if he expended

the emotion, which he did not show, upon the cigar. "How did you know the keys were for this house?" he asked.

"They had small tags on which grandmama had written the names of the doors they opened. 'Front Door'—'Front Gate'—'Servants' Entrance.' "

"I see. And this business matter that you were to see Mr. Sylvester about—what was that?"

I felt a sudden thrill of anger. "The business matter was the trust fund grandmama had established for my benefit—about which Mr. Sylvester was so indiscreet as to tell you."

Eliot smiled slightly. "And when did you learn of your inheritance—or shall I say, your grandparent's benefaction?"

"I recall the date well," I said drily. "It was on the fifth of May."

"Do any of your other relatives—your mother, perhaps, or your brother—know of this trust?"

"No one," I said emphatically.

Stephen Eliot took the pigskin case from his pocket and selected another cigar which I hoped this time he would smoke. I did not care for the controlled, deliberate manner in which he manipulated his cigar—being as careful and as sly with it as he was with me. "What was the next event that strikes you as curious?" he asked.

"Mr. Crump's visit today," I said. "The note which someone flung at him. The queer circle of footprints, as if someone had waltzed, around my grandmother's body. The absence of any clothing, the shocking disorder of the house—her odd attire. And, of course, that cup of tea with its slice of lemon and the cigarette that someone smoked so close to his lips."

Eliot poked at the tiny butt with his fingertip. "It could have burnt down," he said.

"If it had burnt down, why didn't it consume itself?" I asked.

"Uh-hmn. A good point. A bally good point." The Inspector smiled at me.

"Why don't you tell me what you know?" I asked boldly. "You have said that the various members of my family visited this house this morning at one time or another. Have you a list of their arrivals and departures?"

Arthur Crump, who had been standing silently beside me

for some time, evidently felt that it had been too long since he had ventured into the conversation. Unfortunately, he had little to say. "Yes, Inspector, what about those times?" It was a masculine voice, that for the moment was on my side, and I was grateful for it. After all, he was a pleasant enough young man who had innocently walked into trouble. I really felt sorry for him.

Stephen Eliot cleared his throat, laid down his cigar with egregious caution and took the large notebook from his bulging pocket. He thumbed its pages, eyeing each one and making curiosity-provoking noises in his throat. This was all for Arthur's and my own benefit I felt sure, hence I disregarded it. At last he appeared to have the proper page.

"Yes, here 'tis," he said. "Aah, yes. You were the first, Miss Longstreet. You were seen to enter the premises at nineteen minutes past nine—and to leave them, shall we say precipitously?—some few minutes later. Officer McHugh claims you ran off down the avenue no later than nine twenty-four."

"It was not I," I said faintly.

Eliot looked up from his notebook. Both his eyebrows were elevated and I noticed that there were grey hairs among the dark. He really ought to pluck them out, I thought.

"If the woman wasn't you, Miss Longstreet, who—pray tell—could she've been?" His question, though he smiled, was slightly unpleasant.

"It is hardly my concern. I was at home and still abed at that hour this morning."

"Aah, yes. We approached the subject of your alibi—an ugly word!—before, I believe. You said then that your maid —wasn't her name Danvers—" He paused and scratched his dark hair in mock puzzlement. "What an awkward time for my memory to fail me! You see, I must note everything down or I risk losing *the* clue—the thread that will ravel the skein. What did you say about Danvers, Miss Longstreet?"

"I said no more than that," I admitted. "We were interrupted."

"But then what had you begun to say?" he pressed.

"I—I, why I was going to say that Danvers," I stammered. "I thought that Danvers would be able to tell you that I was at home between nine and ten this morning. Then, unfor-

tunately, I remembered that it is between nine and ten that Danvers does the shopping for cook. You see, cook had a fall week before last and—well, she does not walk well. The doctor said that she really should not be on her feet, but it's been impossible to make her stay in bed. But I did persuade Danvers to do the shopping, although she grumbled—" I was badly rattled.

"All very interesting, Miss Longstreet," the Inspector broke in. "But it adds up to this—you don't mind my cutting corners?—that you just don't have an alibi, now do you?"

"No. I guess I do not. But I was asleep at that time. And whoever it was your man saw wearing clothes like mine—"

"And with your hair," Eliot said, clucking his tongue loudly.

"—and with my hair, she was *not* me."

"What about the other relatives, Inspector? Any one of them could have bumped off the old dame," Arthur Crump said with a hint of belligerence. I smiled at him, but he was intent on being grim.

Eliot patted the notebook with his hand. "For the moment I'll take your word, Miss Longstreet. The others? Aah, yes. Well, they all came along—but one by one—presently. You would've thought they had planned it so—really remarkable."

He sat looking at the page, tapping it with his long fingers, forcing us to await his whim. I reminded myself that I must not let his methods get the best of me. Arthur Crump had begun to pace again.

"Now would you believe it?" Eliot said. "But the next to arrive was your mother, Miss Longstreet. I identify her with your own description which tallies quite accurately with my assistant's."

"My mother?" I said.

"She arrived at twenty-five to ten, opened the gate with a key, as she did the front door. She stayed a trifle longer than you—beg pardon, the woman I took for you—and left with less haste. She hailed a taxi in front of the house at quarter to ten. At best, a brief visit."

I had nothing to say and when Eliot realized that I would not comment he continued. "Your sister—I've the name here as Maud, is that correct?—well, Maud arrived at ten to ten. Now isn't that cutting it close? She too had keys and she

stayed about the same time as your mother. She left, in a Ford station wagon she had parked near the house, at five minutes past the hour."

Again he awaited word from me and again I was silent. "I don't want to bore you, Miss Longstreet," he said after an interval, "but all the visits were about the same. Each of them arrived, used keys to get in—and left soon after. Your brother —his name is Jasper?—stayed the longest, sixteen minutes by my assistant's watch. Your own—I beg your pardon, your *impersonator's*—visit was the shortest. Your step-father seemed the angriest. He stopped and shied a pebble at the windows of the mansion upon his departure, luckily, it fell short—no harm done. And your brother's wife—now her name is Shirley, isn't it?—she came out whistling, although my assistant said her pitch—or shall we say the lack of it?—was shameless."

Arthur Crump smacked his fist into his palm. His jaw was set and his eyes glittered. "Fun and games," he said between his teeth.

"You don't believe me, Mr. Crump?" the Inspector inquired mildly.

"You'll admit it's hard to believe," said Arthur.

"Daresay it won't be when we know more," Eliot said. His complacence was outrageous.

"Will you give me the other times, please?" I asked, fighting to control my temper. I did not doubt that the Inspector, or rather his assistants, had seen exactly what he claimed. What irritated me was the presumption of my family in descending *en masse* upon my poor, soon dead, grandmama without informing *me* of their intentions to call. It was unheard-of!

"I'll be pleased to give you the other times, Miss Longstreet," the Inspector said. "Now we had Maud leave at five minutes past the hour, didn't we? Uh—hmn. The next to arrive was her husband, the slight one. He had been sitting on a bench across the street for some time—long enough to observe his wife's visit, but not to witness your mother's departure. He stayed about ten minutes and went walking briskly into the Park—that was between twelve minutes and twenty-two minutes past ten.

"Your brother Jasper arrived at twenty-nine minutes after

the hour—in a taxi which he had wait for him. He did not leave until quarter to eleven, but there was nothing remarkable about his behavior either going or coming. Your stepfather appeared before your brother's taxi was out of sight—by then my assistant says he had become used to the procession and was beginning to take pleasure in it. The hour was thirteen minutes to eleven. Presscott stayed only slightly longer than you did yourself—I beg your pardon, I *will* make the error—leaving by no later than seven minutes before the hour.

"That leaves only your brother's wife—her name is Shirley? —who arrived on the dot of eleven and left at nine past. Again nothing noteworthy, except that my assistant thought she was going to speak to him—in a sense she did—walked right up and asked for a light and went off puffing her cigarette merrily. And, of course, you, Mr. Crump, arrived at quarter past eleven, walked slowly by, were struck on the head and all the rest." The Deputy Chief Inspector sighed and rapped his signet ring against his strong, even teeth.

"I was only walking by. It was a mere accident," Crump said slowly, clenching his fist.

"Of course," sid the Inspector. "And I've been a nuisance. But you will both forgive me?" He smiled blandly first at myself and then at Arthur Crump. He stood slowly and stretched his long legs. "You see, we really must investigate these little disturbances. Especially when we are requested—it's our duty. I get the burden of them in this neighborhood—we call it the silk-stocking slum, ah-hah!—because they say I've tact. But I do believe that nothing will come of it. I want to inspect the grounds first, though. Must be thorough, you know. And I do wish you'd give the medical examiner permission for an autopsy, Miss Longstreet. It's for your own protection. Not that I think anything will come of it. The old lady probably—ahhmn—died a natural death, under curious circumstances."

I was relieved my ordeal was past. I had been thinking about the post mortem, and about Antigone; but I was feeling less and less morbid and Greek. Inspector Eliot was being reasonable and I should be too. I must also admit that it had occurred to me that Jasper, just to spite me, would give permission anyhow.

"You may have your autopsy," I said.

"Thank you, Miss Longstreet," Stephen Eliot said. "I trust you won't regret it—I'm sure you won't. She died a natural death, as you say—but we'll see. Now for a look at the grounds."

He walked around the chair in which he had been sitting. I heard a dull, clanking sound. I saw him bend down and then stand up holding a heavy object—an electric heater. "Fancy that!" he said.

"My grandmother was an old lady," I said. "She must have felt the cold."

"I daresay. But it looks like she had been burning letters." He bent down again and came up with a scrap of long, blackened, ashy paper that crumbled before our eyes. "Quite a pile of it here. You know, I'll have to have it analyzed. We may be able to read them in the lab—we're getting more clever all the time."

He dusted his hands and walked back around the chair. "To the grounds," he said, "just to be nosey. I'll have some of my men check in here for fingerprints and the like—though they are rarely any good."

Stephen Eliot smiled at me and then began to brush past Arthur. He stopped suddenly and stared at the shoulder of Crump's jacket. He turned and looked at me quizzically, after having plucked something nearly invisible from Arthur's coat.

"How long did you say you'd known this young man?" Eliot demanded. Arthur had flushed and I thought he would strike him.

The Deputy Chief Inspector held between his thumb and his forefinger a long, curling red-gold hair.

I remembered how Arthur had picked me up in the hall after my faint. I might have rested my head on his shoulder—indeed, I had. I felt shame.

Eliot did an unforgiveable thing. He walked quickly to me and snatched a hair from my own head. I did not know what he was up to until I felt the twinge. By then he was smiling, holding the two hairs up to the dim light, comparing them, placing them carefully in a handkerchief as if they were valuable clues.

"I'm all in favor of young love, I am," he said. And he

went out humming "Among My Souvenirs." Or, at least, Arthur said that was the name of the banal tune—I am not acquainted with Tin Pan Alley.

SEVEN

"TO TALK ABOUT IT now is only to indulge myself in *l'esprit d'escalier,*" Arthur Crump said, speaking more meticulously than I had heard him do before. "But I do wish I'd been quick enough to ask Inspector Eliot about one casual remark he let fall."

Arthur had sat in grandmama's chair, had collapsed into it, his arms and legs sprawling, and was puffing at his pipe. He had a proprietary air towards me which I did not care for, but at the same time his dark eyes were sincere. "Aren't you going to ask me what remark that was?"

"I think I can tell you," I said slowly. "It was when he was explaining that he was assigned to this neighborhood and that the police were particularly cautious in investigating any disturbance that occurred in this area—didn't he also say 'especially when we are requested'?"

"Those were his very words," Arthur exclaimed. "Now what the devil did he mean by that? And why didn't one of us pick him up on it? He must have intended that we should."

"Hindsight is always better than foresight," I said resignedly. I prefer the homely Americanism to the more esoteric French phrase; indeed, I think the use of tags affected. Also, I was surprised to hear Arthur employ a French usage, since one of his qualities that I had found myself liking was his lack of pretension and even his occasional slangy candor. It is possible that I have led too sequestered a life and it would do me good to get about more. As it was, from Arthur, I had heard a more colloquial English than any to which I had been accustomed since my schooldays.

Arthur was watching me through a wreath of smoke. A pipe is only slightly less foul than a cigarette and he had been puffing at this one incessantly. Grandmama, had she known how her back drawing room was being desecrated, would have been enraged. The passing thought of my dear grandparent

brought tears swiftly to my eyes and I sank down upon a nearby divan.

"You've had a rough time of it," Arthur said sympathetically. "May I get something for you? A glass of water—or would there be brandy in the house?"

"No, thank you—I am quite well," I said. "To go back to what you asked me. Do you think that someone could have requested that the police watch my grandmother's house?"

"Isn't that what he must've meant?" Arthur replied. His small mouth was crooked about his pipe stem; he appeared worried. "You don't look at all well," he said.

"Thank you, I am fine. It just came over me that I'd never see grandmama again." I bit my lip to keep it from trembling. "You would think the shock would have passed by now."

Arthur stood and walked to the divan. He took my hand and I let him hold it. "You should let yourself cry. It would be good—as good as anything can be right now." I was impressed by his sympathy, but then he said—"Damn it, I know I sound awkward and foolish. I never have the right words at these moments."

I had wanted to cry, but suddenly curiosity was the stronger emotion. I had the impression that Arthur was an extraordinarily sensitive being under that standard young man about town exterior. It is not everyone who shrinks from platitudes. I smiled at him.

"That's better," he said. "I don't mind making a fool of myself if it makes you smile. Are you sure I shouldn't get you a brandy?"

"I am really all right," I told him. Perhaps I had been too stiff with him. I was in trouble, or nearly so—with Eliot it was difficult to judge—and I needed a friend. Arthur wanted to be my friend. He could not help it if his education and background were different from my own—it is one thing to respect a tradition and another to be a snob. I trust I am not a snob.

"I prefer to talk about what the Inspector said," I went on. "I fear that it means some member of the family has interfered in my grandmother's affairs."

Arthur looking down at me, his brow crinkling. "You're afraid?" he asked.

"Only in a manner of speaking. I meant that I prefer not to

think that any of us had referred a private matter to the police —but I find I must think so."

"But what would this person have wanted the police to watch the house for?" Arthur asked awkwardly. "True, your grandmother was a recluse, but she had been so for years, hadn't she?"

"I can think of several possible answers to your question," I said. "I told you about the parlormaid who complained that grandmama was dismissing the staff one by one? Isn't it possible that Mabel carried the same tale to my brother—or my mother or sister?"

"And your brother—or whoever—became concerned and asked the police to investigate? But it was fairly long ago that Mabel told this story, wasn't it? Why should whoever requested the police to keep watch have waited a month or more?"

"I do not know," I said. "I must admit that it is also barely possible that grandmama could have asked for a police guard herself. The fact that her clothes were missing—and that the house was ill-cared for—may point to some dread. She could have dismissed the servants out of fear of someone—or something. I do not know what, though." At the back of my mind was the thought of Claude, that something could have gone wrong there. But I could not confide about Claude to a young man I had only just met. Some matters are truly private.

"Can you think of any other reason why someone would call the police?" Arthur asked.

"Jasper could have done it, merely out of spite," I told him. "He was forever causing grandmother difficulty, asking for exorbitant sums, writing nasty letters. As a boy Jasper was not above being prankish, even malicious, to achieve his ends. I know that grandmama refused his latest request for extra money—and he might have thought of requesting police protection for her house to create a nuisance."

"A pleasant *type,*" Arthur said, pronouncing the word the French way. "However, I think that is the least likely of your reasons." He paused and regarded me, his lips on the verge of a smile, his eyes gleaming darkly. "Perhaps I shouldn't say this, but—"

"If you shouldn't say it, don't," I told him.

"I'm going to anyway," he said. He spoke more loudly than

was necessary. "I want to help you. I think you're in more trouble than you know and that you shouldn't face it alone. From what I can gather, this family of yours is plain no good —a bunch of wealthy tramps and eccentrics. You can't look for help from any of them. But there's something sinister going on about this house and this family, something that may next be aimed at you—and, well, you're going to need help." He had stumbled a bit at the last and had flushed with chagrin.

"A very pretty speech," I said. "Don't think I fail to appreciate it. But I do believe you are being unnecessarily melodramatic. My grandmama had a saying—'The worst things in life never happen.' "

"And your grandmama was murdered," Arthur said bluntly.

"Even Inspector Eliot inclines to the theory of natural death," I reminded him.

"Under curious circumstances," Arthur added. "And don't forget that he was eager to get your permission to do an autopsy. The old boy isn't missing any tricks. And he's still out there"—Arthur gestured towards the drawn blinds—"poking about the grounds. He thinks she was murdered too. He only said that to make you feel reassured." Arthur paused and looked away. "That brings up another point," he said, still with his eyes averted. "I want to help you, but—well, there's a question I must ask."

"You may ask it," I said, "although I must say again that I think you are being a bit stagey about all this."

He wet his lips. "I do beg your pardon," he said. "But I do have to know. Did you kill your grandmother?"

"That is an awkward question," I said. "If I said yes, would you believe me—or would you think I was shielding someone? And if I said no, again would you believe me—wouldn't any murderer say no?" He looked at me, his eyes startled and anxious. "But if I answer it one way or another, it means I am subscribing to the preposterous notion that grandmama died violently. And that I am not prepared to do—as yet."

I tried to be off-hand and condescending about what I said; above all I did not want Arthur to know how earnestly I wished him to believe that I was innocent. At the same time I had a scruple against saying right out that I had not killed grandmama—it was a question that it was improper to put or to answer.

"I guess," Arthur said—"I guess I'll help you."

"I am overwhelmed," I said tartly.

He took my hand and clasped it tightly. When I tried to pull away he drew me to him, hard up against him so I felt his breath against my face. He held me so, despite my efforts to push away, my eyes close to his, his lips near my mouth. "You are spoiled," he said with bitter amusement, "and not a little wicked. But, damn me, I like you for it." He was kissing me as the doorbell began to ring. The pressure of his lips against my own started a strange sensation in my flesh, a wilful feeling that I could not control. I'll let him do it this time, I said to myself—it is a life experience I should know. A woman really ought to know what it is to be kissed by a man.

I sincerely believed that my moral intelligence still controlled the beast in me. Alas, I have learned to like the beast—made a pet of her, indeed.

"Darlings, how nice! When will you announce it?"

At the sound of the throaty, feminine voice, I slapped Arthur's face. He let me go at once, his hand flying up to his cheek, his eyes blazing with anger. I turned about to face the tall, elegant figure who stood in the doorway of the back drawing room. You would not have thought her fifty if you were seeing her for the first time. Her figure was trim and her face unlined; some say it is beautiful, although I am too close to her to know. She was wearing a dressmaker suit that day and she had a silver fox stole flung awry on her shoulders. Every curl of her grey-blue hair was in place and her gloved hand held a lizard-skin purse high in salute. My mother had caught me in *flagrante delicto.*

"You do not understand, mama," I said. "I met Mr. Crump only today."

Mother advanced towards us, her hands outstretched. Arthur—his instincts were sound—fell back a pace. "But, children, how too nice!" mother cried. "How very romantic—Maud will be incensed. But, darling"—this to me in a tone of maternal admonition—"you really should call your future husband ~~and~~ by his first name."

"I—I'm afraid there's been a mistake," Arthur began bravely.

"Oh, dear, don't let me spoil it," mother chattered on. She

patted my cheek and walked past me, her eyes on the booty—poor Arthur. "I've made the dear lad shy by my effrontery," she pealed. "But I do want one too. May I, darling?"

Before I could answer her rash question—or prevent her next, impudent act—my mother had enveloped Arthur in her outspread arms and had planted her mouth on his own. I should like to report that Arthur was shamed and that he struggled to get free. It was not so. He held her firmly and his hand travelled over her shoulders to the neat nape of her neck, which it caressed. Arthur gave every sign of ardor.

"Mama," I cried, "I tell you that you just do not understand. You are making a horrible—a ghastly—mistake!"

Mother relaxed her embrace at that point, but Arthur held onto her, looked deeply into her eyes and then glanced down at her sensuous mouth. "A particularly nice mistake," said Arthur Crump, winking at me—"but Abigail—who I take to be your daughter, madame—is entirely correct. You have made a mistake. Introduce us, Abigail." My mother remained in his arms. Her behavior irked me, but it also made me feel a different, more unsettling emotion. I had to restrain myself to keep from pulling her away from him by brute force.

"The woman in your arms is my mother, *Mrs.* Presscott," I said as coldly as possible. "The man you have mistaken for my fiance is Mr. Arthur Crump.

Mother's mouth pouted sulkily, but she withdrew at last from Arthur's arms. I know mother cannot help it—it is her nature to be impulsive and, well—I might as well admit it—lecherous.

"Such a nice young man, darling," she said, smiling approvingly at me. "I'm sure if I've made a mistake it's not for long. How can you resist him?" She turned flirtatiously to Arthur. "But I warn you Arthur—and as I am her mother I ought to know—dear Abigail has a passion for self-restraint. Just look at her clothes."

Mama was being catty, only one of the reasons why we do not get on. If she had had her way, I should have led a debased life. Fashion was my mother's great god, although she also worshipped Mammon. Fortunately, I had been able to model myself on another person—my beloved Ella.

"Have you ever seen an attractive young woman—and she is beautiful, isn't she, Arthur?—who dressed herself in such

outmoded rags?" mother rattled on. "I do hope that you can persuade her, now that you're engaged, to wear modern clothes and be human."

I expected Arthur to be angry. Mother was doing her best to humiliate him. He seemed, however, to be greatly amused. "I shall do my best, Mrs. Prescott," he said with a little bow.

"And you must broaden her mind, Arthur—you don't care if I call you Arthur?—after all, you are practically one of the family! Yes, broaden her mind and make her a bit more tolerant. Her viewpoint is uncomfortably straightened, don't you think?"

I have often promised myself never to quarrel with mama again. For one thing, it does not pay. Lizbeth is a ruthless opponent—she will do anything to win a point and nothing to concede one. I could feel my nerves fraying. If Lizbeth did not stop soon, I would make a scene.

"Mrs. Prescott, you are making a mistake," Arthur was saying soberly. "I'll admit that I was imprudent enough to embrace your daughter—that I also admire her—but as yet we haven't talked of marriage."

Lizbeth was not to be put off. She tossed her head and asked for a cigarette. Since Arthur had none, there was a great fuss over extracting one from her pack in the huge lizard-skin purse, that had an ingenious clasp which Lizbeth could not work, and then more fuss with the light. When the complex ritual—in which I knew my mother took vain satisfaction—was completed, she continued her attack.

"Look here, dear boy, you forget I'm psychic. While on the way over here Eddie—he's my control, a brave lad who died in the London blitz—was telling me all about you. Eddie said that Abbie had met a tall, dark, handsome man from overseas. You are from overseas, aren't you?"

"Brooklyn," said Arthur.

"I'm sure you're mistaken," my mother declared. "As soon as I walked into the room I knew you were the one Eddie referred to—there's a Gallic look about you somehow—"

"I come from Brooklyn," Arthur said. "Greenpernt."

Mama laughed. "Oh, now I know you're joking. People don't come from Greenpoint. Or if they do, they never admit it."

"I did," Arthur said sternly. For a man who had been

amused by my mother's antics so short a time before, he was now taking them amazingly seriously.

"Mama, this must stop," I said clearly. "I can not let you rail at me—I really can not."

"Don't be a prig, Abbie. I want to get to the bottom of this. I do have some parental responsibility to you—I mustn't let the man you are going to marry lie to you about his background. And you will marry him. Eddie said so and the dear lad is never, never wrong. On the other side, my child, all error is eliminated. As the great poet said in a psychic moment—"To err is human."

"Mother!" I shrieked.

"You are riding her a little hard, aren't you, Mrs. Presscott?" Arthur said. His voice was tense and I knew he was as angry as I was. Well, he had brought it on himself.

Mother threw her partly-smoked cigarette at the fireplace. "I don't know what has come over the present generation," she said. "So deadly serious—Arthur, my own daughter is a reactionary. She dresses in the clothes of the turn of the century, she sequesters herself as if she were a nun—I expect any day to hear that she is taking lessons on the lute. And now you rebuff me simply because I refuse to hide my faculty—to foretell the future." She shook her shoulders in what she must have thought was an enticing way, but which struck me as only bawdy. "Well, there's nothing left for me but to see the old girl. Imagine, darlings, two command invitations in only one day after not having to look at the Great Stone Face for fifteen years. Pets, it is too fatiguing!"

Lizbeth Presscott started to leave the room, but before she reached the door she turned around and looked at me inquiringly. "You're her favorite, Abigail—and you must've been summoned to her presence also, or else you wouldn't set foot in this sacred place, I know—what is the old miser after this time? She asked me the oddest questions this morning."

"Are you referring to grandmama?" I asked, a chill passing my vertebrae.

"Who else but the hag herself?" She glanced at Arthur and said malevolently, "Eighty if a day, blind as a bat—and stingy to boot."

"Grandmama is dead," I said.

Lizbeth swayed slightly, her lips opening, her head wobbly.

"Jasper meant it when he said that she was a pest and had to be exterminated like any other pest. Oh, how wicked!"

She looked away unsteadily and said reproachfully over her shoulder, "Eddie, why didn't you tell me? This way it is such a test for my poor, shattered nerves!"

Neither Arthur nor I saw her faint and we were not in time to prevent her fall. Having fallen, she had to lie still to make her pretense appear real. It was unfortunate because she fell badly, her leg doubled beneath her—and it must have been uncomfortable to lie like that.

But Arthur and I had our eyes glued to the door. Inspector Stephen Eliot was standing in it and behind him were two of his assistants, bent under the weight of a heavy, cylindrical object that was covered with mud and dirt.

"What do you suppose," the Inspector asked us, *"this* was doing in the grape arbor?"

EIGHT

"I VACILLATE," said Stephen Eliot, twitching his long-fingered hand to and fro to symbolize his mental swing—"I say yea and then I say nay. But I must admit finding this object so recently buried makes me tend, at the moment, to yea. Grandmama must've been done in by hand or hands unknown."

The assistants had lugged the heavy cylinder into the drawing room and had thumped it down upon the precious rug, while Arthur and I were reviving Lizbeth. Eliot had hardly glanced at my mother. "The first of my guests has arrived, I see," had been his single comment. Now Lizbeth was sitting up and sipping cooking sherry that I had found in the kitchen.

"May I ask what it is?" I was sure I had seen metal cylinders such as this one from time to time. Usually they were piled near excavations or in dentists' offices when you went to have a tooth extracted.

"It's a tank of compressed air," Arthur said. "See the pressure gauge?" He pointed to a small instrument that had a needle and a calibrated scale.

"But what would that be doing in the grape arbor?" I asked.

"A perceptive question, Miss Longstreet," Eliot said. "A question I've been asking myself ever since I discovered it in a shallow trough, hastily scooped out of the muddy ground—you remember the downpour of last night?—and trampled down by someone with large, bare feet."

"Bare feet?" wailed my mother. Her tone was neither a shriek nor a sigh, but it indicated agitation. Lizbeth, however, is often in a state of agitation.

Eliot regarded her politely and sceptically. "Does that strike a chord, Mrs. Prescott?"

"A chord? Oh, no. No, nothing like that. Eddie says he knows nothing about it, that someone may have left it there by mistake." Lizbeth had her head turned partly about in a listening attitude. Eliot shook his head and glanced at me.

"Who is Eddie?" he asked.

"Her control," I said. "I told you she thinks she is psychic."

My mother did not seem to have overheard this exchange. "Eddie says that some workmen may have left it."

"There have been no workmen on the grounds for several days, Mrs. Prescott," the Inspector said. "I've had men watching the house for that period."

"I thought you ordered a watch only this morning?" I said quickly. I took pleasure in catching the Inspector in an inconsistency.

"Did I say that?" Eliot asked. "Fact is, I increased the number on guard from one to several this morning. But a man had been on duty since day before yesterday—at your grandmother's request."

Inspector Eliot was coolly admitting that he had been lying to me when he said that his investigation had begun as a result of a routine check. I regarded him as steadfastly as I was able and said, "I thought Officer McHugh only happened to be passing by this morning when he saw the woman you mistook for me enter the gate to this house?"

Eliot laced his fingers together and chuckled drily. "You've caught me out, Miss Longstreet—that you have. I did withhold certain facts from you when we had our conversation, but—as you may recall—you also attempted to keep me from learning certain facts. In theory, Miss Longstreet, the representative of law and order should play the game fair and square. But then so should those he interrogates. In practice,

Miss Longstreet, since the other side resorts to such low tactics and unsportsmanlike methods, so, alas, must we."

"Now you want me to believe that my grandmother requested police protection?" I said flatly.

"Not precisely protection, Miss Longstreet," Eliot answered, resting his large hand lightly on his slablike chin. The man at times had a pontifical air that distressed me. "She was specific as to her desires. She wanted the police to watch the house, to observe the comings and goings—but not to interfere. Or so we interpreted her instructions."

"I do not believe it," I said.

"But no one would be coming or going, would they?" Lizbeth inquired. "Ella was a recluse."

"I'm afraid you'll have to believe it," Eliot said. "Unless you can prove to me that someone other than your grandmother wrote this." He took the unwieldly notebook from his bulging pocket and opened it to a page where a sheet of my grandmama's notepaper had been pasted. Unsnapping the binder, he took the page from the book and placed it in my hands. I saw a brief note, much like the one Arthur Crump had given me that morning, inscribed in Ella's unmistakable copperplate handwriting. The envelope which had contained it was also stuck to the page and I saw that it had been addressed to the Commissioner of Police of the City of New York.

The note read:

Dear Commissioner:—

I have reason to request that an officer of the law be placed on duty where he can observe my residence and its grounds at all times. He is to keep a record of any arrival or departure and to note any circumstance which may appear irregular. He is also to respect my privacy and that of my family.

Respectfully yours,

Ella Maybelle Longstreet

There was no date, but the receiving clerk had stamped the time of day and the date upon the envelope—it was an early morning hour and a day at the beginning of that present week. The postmark was twelve hours before the hour received.

The only thing unusual about the missive was that it should exist at all.

I handed the page back to the Inspector, who displayed it so that Arthur and my mother might see, and then fitted it into his notebook. "I might say, Miss Longstreet, that when the Commissioner referred this matter to me, I was instructed to treat it with circumspection. At the moment, there are one thousand and twenty-three known recluses in the city of New York—I speak only of the jurisdiction of Manhattan—and these are on all levels of society. Your grandmother was the wealthiest and most notorious." He saw me wince at the word and he smiled gently.

"The Department knows from past experience that many recluses meet, if not untimely, then violent, ends. A nominal supervision is kept of all of them, wherever possible. So Officer McHugh, and his mates on the beat, had routine instructions to keep an eye on the house and grounds. I didn't lie to you, you see; I only withheld a fraction of the truth—that on receipt of your grandmother's letter special precautions were put into force."

"I think it's most extraordinary," Lizbeth said. "When did Jasper kill her? And have you caught him yet?"

My mother had succeeded where I had not: Inspector Eliot was visibly jarred from his massive complacency by my mother's words. He took his time to recover, resorting to the pigskin cigar case from which he selected another Havana cigar to fondle. He was like the Chinese with their fingering pieces, I thought—or a child with its pacifier.

"You have reason to believe, Mrs. Presscott, that your son is responsible for your mother's death? I trust I needn't tell you that is a very grave accusation."

Lizbeth tossed her head, the tight, blue-grey curls frolicking with abandon. "He was terribly angry with her. She had been nasty and parsimonious with the dear lad again and this time he told me that none of us need put up with Ella much longer. I said, 'What do you mean, Jasper?'—hoping, I shall confess, that he meant what I thought. 'She needs killing,' he answered —'and I'm the only one who isn't too chicken to do it.' Jasper was in one of those awful training camps briefly during the last war," Lizbeth added apologetically, "and, on occasion, he

uses a vulgar word or phrase. 'Chicken,' I take it, has something to do with cowardice."

Eliot stared at my mother. "Uh—hmn," he said. He continued to stare at her unblinkingly. Then he withdrew his watch from his pocket and fixed his stare upon it. "Time for tea," he remarked at last, raising his eyes to me. "Would you and Mr. Crump be so kind to prepare it, Miss Longstreet? When I was in the kitchen, I noted a canister of it, as well as a kettle and a number of cups and saucers."

Arthur and I were being dismissed. The Inspector wished to speak with my mother alone and this was what he would call being "tactful." Lizbeth had asked for it and now she was in for it. I took a certain satisfaction in knowing how uncomfortable the next quarter-hour or so would be for her.

I walked to the door and Arthur followed me. "Close the door behind you, if you please," Eliot called after us. "And tell my assistant to admit no one. I'm expecting the other members of your family to arrive presently—but I fear they must await my convenience."

Arthur saw that Eliot had made me angry and the young man placed his hand on my arm and smiled. I knew he was right. Nothing was to be gained by losing my temper. Eliot made a practice of bullying people indirectly. In rage a suspect might reveal something that he would sooner conceal. I went to the door and placed my hand on the knob. But the Inspector decided to loose a final barb.

"Oh, Miss Longstreet. One other detail—when you return with the tea—and be sure the water is steaming hot—will you please be so kind as to knock before you enter?"

Arthur put his hand over mine, yanked the door open and thrust me through it. He followed me and then slammed the door behind him. The sound echoed in the great hall. One of Eliot's assistants, a nondescript fellow in a double-breasted suit —who had been lounging against the wall near the door— jumped forward at the noise.

"What's up?" he demanded. "Does the Inspector need me?"

"No," Arthur said. "But he told us to tell you to admit no one until we return with some tea."

The fellow looked at Arthur askance. "Tea?" he said. "Now ain't that nice?"

There was a canister of tea in the kitchen cupboard, as the Inspector had said there would be. By and large the kitchen was clean enough, although there were some dishes in the sink and the first kettle I discovered had sediment in it. While I put some water on to boil, Arthur poked about in the cupboard, peering into pots and pans and making an annoying clatter.

"Whatever are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm looking for clues," he said in a muffled voice due to the fact that his head at that moment was stuck into a large copper pot.

"But what kind of clues do you expect to find there?" I asked. "It would be better if you looked for a lemon and the cream and sugar—if there is any left."

"I'd think there would be cream in the refrigerator," Arthur said, "if it's running." He closed the cupboard door and crossed to the large, gleaming, porcelain box. As he threw open the door the interior light came on. Arthur bent down to inspect the contents—from where I stood I could see several bottles of milk and cream. But Arthur seemed to be interested in the other contents of the refrigerator.

"Well, at least, deliveries have been made regularly," I said. "Although how my poor grandmama, blind as she was, managed to get to the parcel box near the servants' entrance and back to the house without harming herself I cannot say."

"The signs are that there haven't been any servants around the house for some time," Arthur said, still without taking his head out of the refrigerator. I began to suspect that he was raiding the icebox.

"If you are hungry, you know, you can bring whatever you take into full view—you don't have to hide from me. I am sure no one will mind."

Arthur straightened up and looked at me, a puzzled expression on his face. "You do think the worst of people, don't you? I wouldn't be surprised if your mother is right and that you are insufferably narrow."

"Well, what would you think if I took that long in getting a bottle of cream?" I snapped. I knew that I was actually angry at the Inspector and that I was only taking my miff out on Arthur.

"Let's not argue," he said. "Come over here and look inside instead."

I did as he suggested and soon was as puzzled as he. The refrigerator contained large quantities of many kinds of food in every degree of condition. There was a large prime rib roast of beef that had never been cooked, but which had been torn at and gnawed as if a dog had been at it. Eggs littered every shelf, some smashed, some odoriferous, others apparently fresh. Small dabs of cooked vegetables were smeared here and there, a large tomato had been bitten into and left—there were apple halves, bits of bread streaked with mayonnaise, a spilled pickle jar and other oddities too numerous to list.

"What do you make of that?" Arthur asked.

"I would say that my grandmother, being old and blind and without a servant, was not as orderly as she might have been." I did not want to let Arthur know it, but I was appalled. All afternoon I had been referring to the fact that grandmama must have been without a staff, not even kitchen help, but it took the sight of the refrigerator to make me realize how helpless she must have been.

Arthur shook his head. "That may be part of it," he said, "but it doesn't explain that roast of beef. I can't imagine your grandmother gnawing raw meat." He took the roast in his hands. "It hasn't been bitten," he said, "as a human would bite. It is rent and torn, dug at and gouged—as if some clumsy animal had been worrying it."

I thought of the hoarse, snuffling sounds I had heard in the upstairs hall—and the pathetic attempt to hum the tune by Strauss. Claude had been neglected and he was hungry, but how had he escaped? I had to search the house and the grounds and find him, although what I should do once I had found him I had not yet decided. I should need Arthur's help, whatever I did; but I did not think the way to elicit his assistance was by telling him about Claude now.

"I don't know," I said. "Somehow it hurts me to look at it."

Arthur shut the door of the refrigerator, after having taken out the bottle of cream. "I think I know what you mean." He peeled the cap from the bottle and tasted the cream. "It isn't sour," he said. "It must've been put in the refrigerator recently."

"The tea will be ready soon," I said.

Arthur put the bottle of cream down on a table and placed his hands upon my shoulders. We stood a foot or so apart looking at each other. I should not have allowed him the intimacy, I knew; but I had come to realize that it was a part of his nature to be impulsive, to caress and to fondle, to express himself by means of touch. And, I suppose, I trusted him—this trait of his may have been why. When I was a child, I cannot remember being held lovingly, of going to sleep in someone's arms.

"Abigail, there's something about your family, about this house, that you aren't telling me," Arthur said. "I want to know what it is."

"There is not anything, Arthur," I said. "I should tell you if there were."

His eyes had grown sad and his face had lines in it I had not seen before. I know that I had hurt him, that he was sensitive enough to know that I was telling him that I did not trust him. "You must believe me," I said softly.

"You are used to having your own way, aren't you?" he said.

"Perhaps. But I am also always careful to see that my way is the best for other people."

"How can you know, Abigail? Don't you ever doubt yourself?"

He did not speak reproachfully, although his words could have been interpreted as reproof. The tone of his voice changed them; softened them and made them almost wistful. I felt that he was pleading with me to be different with him, that he was talking about my answer to a single question but that what he said referred to my whole life and his whole life, to the conflict in our ways that would keep us apart. I was sorry for him.

"I cannot doubt grandmama," I said. "She was a great woman. She had to be great and she was—I have to be like her."

He shook his head and his hands tightened upon my shoulders. "No, you don't, Abigail," he said. "You can be yourself. You don't have to be great—you can be you. You can give yourself a chance."

I wanted then to tell him what he had asked to know, though I knew it was not important. He would help me—

without question. He would help me with Claude, and as much as he could he would help me with Inspector Eliot. But if I told him, and as I thought this I knew I would not tell him, it would be better for him. That way he could be a man. I did not tell him.

He helped me with the cups and saucers. When we went out into the hall, the rest of the family were waiting there restively. Jasper came up to me, crying: "Is it true that our sainted grandmother was murdered? Who did it—or don't you really know? I'll lay you odds it was Sybil!"

I tried to avoid my brother and walk directly to the door of the back drawing room, but Jasper kept up with me. He was as sardonic as ever and his eyes glittered with malice. I noticed that Arthur Crump was watching his exaggerated gestures with distaste.

"When are we going to get to see Inspector Eliot?" Jasper was demanding in a whining voice. "We've all received the same urgent summons by the police to come to this house for an interview with the Inspector. And now that we're all here, they've herded us into this draughty hall like so much cattle."

The others had come up and were echoing Jasper's complaints. Maud stood beside me and eyed me possessively—I shall always be her little sister to Maud and it is a role I detest. "What's this Inspector like, Abbie?" Maud asked. "Is he a tough old cop or one of those well-trained college boys?"

I told her that in my opinion Stephen Eliot fell into neither category. Arthur had lost interest in Jasper's eccentricities and was now smiling at Maud. I could not be jealous: my elder sister is the healthy type who looks best with a tennis racket or a putting shot in her hands. She would not know what to do with a man if she had one.

Certainly Maud's husband, Oliver Derwent, is not a man. He sidled up to me and smiled at the tea things which I was still attempting to get into the drawing room. "I'm so glad you've made tea," he said. "It has been a tiring day—so embarrassing with that difficult interview with Ella this morning and now it looks like we are all going to have to submit to something even worse." Oliver did not lisp and he did not have a speech impediment, but his words fell from his lips unnaturally; like his growth, his speech was stunted.

"Did you talk with Ella this morning?" I asked, although I knew the answer.

"I wish I could forget it!" Oliver responded. "And it was very trying. She didn't seem able to speak clearly and I'm afraid I understood only part of what she said." He looked at me inquiringly. "Why have they asked us to write down what we remember of what happened when each of us saw Ella?"

I had begun to be interested in what Oliver was saying. "You mean the police?" I asked. When he nodded his head, I said, "The Inspector may want to check your stories and I suppose it is the simplest way." But I was actually wondering what Lizbeth was saying to Eliot—I sometimes thought my mother would say *anything* to gain an effect—and if something she had said had led the Inspector to use this means of questioning.

Shirley had been listening to our conversation and now she broke in. She had her hands thrust deeply into the pockets of a mannish-cut, suede skirt and her bobbed hair was as unkempt as I have ever seen it. "I looked at some of the others' statements," she said, "while they were writing them, and there seems to be a difference of opinion as to whether Ella was alive or dead. Anyway, I wish they'd get whatever is going on in there over with so I can go back to my work."

Jasper leered at her, "Darling—as if you'd worked for days!"

"Shut up, you bitch!" Shirley snarled at her husband. The nondescript young man by the door looked up from the comic book he had at last dared to take out of his pocket—and shook his head at the group of us. I wondered what Eliot would make of Jasper.

I decided that the tea was getting cold and I pushed through my relatives towards the door. "Arthur, you may rap," I said, "and if the Inspector does not want us yet, we can find out soon enough."

My step-father, Edward Presscott, looked at his watch. He was the only member of the family who had not joined the crowd around me. A tall, sullen, bleakly-handsome man, I had never liked him and I was convinced he disapproved of me. Edward had money of his own when he married Lizbeth, but I doubted that he had any now. I knew that he gambled—I

had paid his chits. And I knew other things about him that I should have preferred not to have known.

Now, as Arthur knocked upon the door, my step-father strode over to where I was standing. He lowered his head until his face was near mine—a blank expanse of tanned flesh that unexpectedly creased into a grudging smile. "I'll have to hand it to you, daughter," he said. "I wouldn't have thought you were that clever. And you did a neat job too. But be careful with this Eliot because he is subtle and tricky. If you can't answer a question, refuse to on the grounds that it might incriminate you. And if you need an alibi, let me know. I've got some good contacts in the trade."

I heard Inspector Eliot call "come in!" his voice resounding even through the thickness of the oak door. As I entered the room, walking carefully so as not to spill the tea, I knew that my stepfather thought I had murdered my grandmother—and that I should be an easy mark for blackmail in the future. All in the family, of course.

NINE

"THE ASSEMBLED GUESTS are to remove their shoes and stockings," Inspector Eliot announced as soon as we were all seated in the rear drawing room. The Inspector stood with his back to the fireplace, his elbow resting on the mantel, his long hand propped against his squared chin. The blinds had been adjusted and the late afternoon sun gilded the room, making it unreal for me who had always remembered it as a scene of shadows.

I had placed the tray on a low table near grandmama's chair and had been about to sort the cups and saucers before pouring the tea. At the Inspector's strange request, I looked around me. I saw that my mother was smiling at the rest of us. I had not expected her to be so confident after the interview with Stephen Eliot and my curiosity was provoked

"Is this some kind of a parlor game?" Edward Presscott demanded.

No one had yet done as the Inspector had asked. "I mean it most seriously," Eliot said. He nodded his head towards a mass of hardened white substance on the floor at his feet.

"Footprints were found in the grape arbor," he said. "The prints of bare feet. Someone had buried a cylinder of compressed air in the damp earth and had trampled it down. I want to see if any of those present have feet that match the plaster of Paris cast one of my assistants made of those prints."

I took off my own shoes and stockings as an example to the others. The shoes I prefer are high and laced and the stockings are fastened by intimate means. I had to leave the room to accomplish the task. When I returned, Eliot had lined my family up in a row leading to the fireplace, before which he had placed the plaster cast. Jasper was the first in line.

"We are all ready?" Eliot inquired. "Then you may begin, Mr. Longstreet. Simply stand in the prints, unless you see that your feet are larger and will crush their outlines. There —that does it. No, you won't do. Next!"

The line moved slowly forward. There was some grumbling and Edward Presscott, whose place in line was just ahead of mine, said to me behind his hand—"I've heard of the old boy's queer methods. They say he does things that no other investigator would do, but he gets results. You had better watch your step, daughter."

I do not care to be referred to as daughter by a man who did not marry my mother until I was eight years old. And I am not used to going barefoot—the thick pile of the rug tickled the soles of my feet and I had to concentrate on my effort not to giggle nonsensically.

"Now that's a pretty pair of feet," I heard the Inspector say to Shirley—"won't do for our purposes, I fear." The line had shrunk considerably and in various parts of the room those who had passed the test were putting their shoes and stockings back on.

I realized that I had not been following the Inspector's experiment. "Has he found anyone whose feet match the cast?" I asked Presscott.

"Not as yet," Presscott said, "And if you ask me, he's not going to. What's more, I don't think the old boy expected any of our feet to match it. He is testing something else besides our feet." As Edward talked, Oliver had taken his test—his feet were far too small—and it was Edward's turn.

As he neared the Inspector, Prescott raised instead of lowering his voice. And as he approached the cast, he said, "I'm right, eh, Eliot? You aren't too concerned about the size of our feet?"

Eliot glanced up at Edward, smiling blandly. "Just put your foot right there," he said—"and there. Aah, a near fit!" He knelt to examine the cast more closely. Edward's feet did very nearly fit it, except for one discrepancy—both of his toes were splayed beyond the confines of the impression.

"No, won't do, I fear." Eliot stood up and looked severely at my step-father. "What were you saying?"

Edward's lips had set and his cheeks had blanched under their tan. "Nothing consequential," he muttered.

"I think it was," Eliot corrected him. "You weren't doubting my purpose in checking the feet of those present with this plaster impression?"

Edward made a gruff sound in his throat and looked away. But he could not escape the Inspector's gaze—when he looked back it was still upon him. "I thought you might be more interested in how each of us took the embarrassment of this test. It would be a short-cut to understanding our personalities."

"And if the murderer were present, he might try to hide his guilt by some kind of an exaggerated reaction," the Inspector said gently.

"If that's the way you reason, then I'm your man," Presscott said with forced bluntness. I felt he wanted to end the conversation and that he would have preferred to have said anything but what he had said—yet he knew he had to bully his way out. Despite his confidence in himself, he did not understand Stephen Eliot.

"Or then again," Eliot said, "the murderer might try to make himself as inconspicuous as possible."

Prescott grasped at the straw. "That's more like it," he said. "The murderer is one of the quiet ones."

Eliot laughed heartily. "And you are entirely innocent, aren't you, Mr. Presscott?"

Edward laughed too; he was not the sort of man who could stand silent while another laughed, even though he did not see the joke. Yet, even as he laughed, he began to edge away from the Inspector.

"Isn't it fortunate that your feet didn't quite fit the cast, Mr. Presscott?" the Inspector said. "Ah, Miss Longstreet, you are next—and last."

My feet, of course, did not fit the impressions. I left the room again to make the necessary adjustments to my clothes and upon my return I found that the Inspector had asked the family to draw their chairs around him in a semi-circle. Lizbeth sat in the first chair on his left, Jasper and Shirley had drawn up the small divan, there was an empty place—apparently left for myself—between them and Oliver, while Maud and Edward completed the arc. Only Arthur Crump remained standing near the empty chair which I was to take. As I sat down, he told me, "The Inspector has the statements made by each of your relatives to one of his assistants about how they came to visit the house this morning and what happened during each visit. I think he's going to read them."

Arthur was mistaken: Stephen Eliot did not read the various statements, at least not at first. He smiled at me, slightly sardonically, I thought, and said, "We've been awaiting your return, Miss Longstreet. Everyone concerned with this house—with the exception of the servants, whose absence we can do nothing about at present—should hear what I have to say so that we can begin to straighten out this puzzling matter."

Eliot was entirely at his ease. He was a man who enjoyed having an audience and I thought that if he could be fooled it might be through this weakness. His desire to act might sometimes outweigh his prudence and if one knew this possibility and cautiously explored it—well . . .

"As you all know by now, Ella Maybelle Longstreet died sometime this morning," the Inspector went on. "Until the post mortem is completed it's going to be chancey to say exactly *when* she died, and even after the analysis we may not know. However, the precise time of death may not be of importance. *Why* she died strikes me as being more important than *when*—but in this case the *how* of her death is of the greatest importance. For one thing, on casual medical examination the cause of her death is not apparent. Women of her age do die, but usually on finding their bodies one can hazard a guess as to *what* they died of, even without the exact information of a post mortem. But the

only explanation I've heard offered as to the cause of Ella Longstreet's death is that she died of *terror.*"

Edward Presscott had tilted back his chair; at the word "terror," he hunched forward and the chair came down with a crash. The sound served to release the tension around the room and an excited murmur could be heard. Only Arthur and I were not surprised. Lizbeth glanced at me, her eyes larger than usual and her lovely mouth agape. Jasper, whose features had lapsed into a permanent sneer, seemed shaken.

"Abigail Longstreet found the body at a few minutes after one this afternoon—perhaps five minutes past," Eliot continued. I could see that he was pleased by the effect his words were having. "According to her account—unfortunately Miss Longstreet has carelessly destroyed the evidence that would support her story—Ella's body lay near the entrance to the great hall, dressed only in the briefest of swimming suits. The floor of the hall was covered with a thick deposit of dust which was undisturbed except for a circle of footprints around the body."

"Not around the body," I corrected him. "The body lay in the footprints, as if grandma had made them herself and had fallen in her tracks."

Eliot nodded his head. "That is exactly what you said and I have reported it clumsily. The body lay in the footprints. Some of the footprints were long and smudged, as if the foot that made them had slipped—Miss Longstreet suggested that whoever made the prints had waltzed in a tight circle. Or, perhaps, the person had fallen several times."

"Sybil!" Jasper said in a hoarse whisper to his wife. "I'll lay you odds-on it was Sybil!"

"There were other peculiar circumstances," Eliot said, ignoring my brother's imprudent interruption. "Although the body's feet were bare, and the soles covered with a layer of dust, there were no other footprints on the floor—none leading to the circle of prints I've described, none leading away."

"May I ask a question at this point?" Edward Presscott asked. He seemed compelled to draw attention to himself whenever he had the opportunity. I thought it unwise of him.

"You may ask questions at any time," Eliot said, not only addressing Edward, but also the room at large.

"Have you compared the body's feet with the prints in the plaster cast?"

"That has been done," the Insector replied. "A cast was taken of the body's feet and compared to this impression. They were not the same." He looked about at the rest of us. "Any other questions?

"If not, I shall continue. Miss Longstreet, after finding her grandmother's body in these unusual circumstances shortly past one o'clock this afternoon, fainted. Mr. Crump, who had been instrumental in her visiting the house, had happened to follow her here. He discovered her unconscious and did what any man could in such a situation."

A few of the family were impolite enough to giggle nervously at the Inspector's crass remark. He smiled benignly upon them and waited for them to have their pleasure. Then he went on to describe again how Arthur Crump had happened to be passing the mansion at seventeen minutes past eleven that morning, how he had been struck on the head by the note in my grandmother's handwriting that had been crumpled around her wedding band and how he had brought the note to me, after first having looked up my address in the telephone directory.

"Miss Longstreet and Mr. Crump weren't the first to visit this house today," Eliot went on, "as each of you is aware. But before we go into each of your earlier arrivals—and departures—we had better reveal the least fortunate aspect of the case." Here, Stephen Eliot paused at length to regard me, so that everyone else in the room inferred that what he was about to say concerned myself. It was a despicable action.

"After she had regained consciousness, Miss Longstreet—that is to say, Miss Abigail Longstreet, should any of you be in doubt—succeeded in persuading her friend, Mr. Crump, to leave her alone in the house on the pretext of having him go for the doctor.

"Of course, as soon as Mr. Crump left the house, my assistants and I detained him in conversation. We learned enough of the details of Ella Longstreet's death from him that I thought it advisable to send for the medical examiner, the photographer and the fingerprint men. It was clear that here might have been foul play."

The Inspector glanced down at his hands and twisted the gold ring on his finger. "When we had finished questioning him, I presented myself to Miss Longstreet in my official capacity. As soon as I had entered the house, I saw that the great hall had been swept clean and that there wasn't any body in sight. I also quickly realized that Miss Longstreet didn't welcome the police—and wasn't inclined to be candid even with a Deputy Chief Inspector in whose confidence the most unflagging candor rests secure."

Indubitably, Deputy Chief Inspector Stephen Eliot was an obnoxious, conceited ass! I shifted about in my chair and glowered at him. He affected not to notice.

"I trust I'm not boring you with these details," Eliot said. "As an investigator I find all the foibles of a suspect's character most interesting; however, I'm aware that to a layman they may appear prosaic. To get on with it, my assistants located the body of Ella Maybelle—I rather fancy that middle name!—Longstreet, properly dressed in a shroud, upon the bed in the bedroom of the deceased. Miss Longstreet, when pressed about the contradictions and dishonesties in her evidence, admitted that she had carried her grandmother's body up to the bedroom and had laid it out in a shroud. Her defence for this ruthless destruction of evidence was that she didn't want the doctor to see her grandmother's body in the condition in which she had found it. In almost any other witness, I'd've thought this a disgraceful and outrageous attempt to pull the wool over my near-sighted old eyes—but when it comes to Miss Abigail Longstreet, I'm not so sure. For a modern young lady—which she is despite herself—she has a veritably neo-Confucian veneration for her ancestors."

If Eliot had expected to induce me to blurt some deadly fact by means of his ill-considered jibes, he was mistaken. As he became more personal in his remarks, I gained greater objectivity. I was only one suspect in a family. He was only a policeman, if an eccentric and conceited one, despite his unusual intelligence and perverse wit, who was faced with the difficulties of the mysterious death of a famous, highly-placed and wealthy recluse. He could tell the members of my family nothing that would cause them anything but

amusement, and if the wretches were willing to be entertained at my expense—well, I could endure it.

"There are only a few other details that we must add," the Inspector said. "One has to do with the shroud. Miss Longstreet claims—and I see no reason not to believe her on this point—that when she ventured into her grandmother's closet she found all the old lady's clothes missing, except the aforementioned shroud. Hence, she clothed the body in this same shroud.

"Another fascinating detail is this cup of tea—" Eliot reached for the teacup and the ashtray that were set on the table beside my grandmother's ladder-backed chair. "By the way, Miss Longstreet, hadn't you better pour *our* tea? It must be getting cold?" And, after saying this coolly, he gathered up the cup my grandmother had ostensibly drunk from and the ashtray with the tiny cigarette butt that her presumed visitor had so carelessly left.

I went over to a larger table where Arthur and I had left the tea things. The pot seemed at best lukewarm, but I did not care. Arthur had followed me over to the table to help me and he stood close to me so that he might speak quietly and the others would not hear. "Don't let Eliot annoy you, Abigail. It's just his way of getting at people—it doesn't mean anything."

I wanted to say something tart in reply, perhaps from a need to take my exasperation out on somebody, but then I saw how kindly he was smiling at me—it was a nice smile, soft, gentle and—well, frank—and I said instead, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words—" I did not finish the adage, since my grandmother always said to do so was to imply that your companion was ignorant.

"That's the spirit, Abigail. Why don't you slip a little cyanide into Eliot's cup? It might do the world a lot of good." Arthur said this last in a voice loud enough to be foolhardy. I glanced over my shoulder and saw Edward Presscott's knowing eyes watching us.

As I poured the tea and Arthur began to hand the filled cups around to the others, I realized that the Inspector's little speech was still going on "—so you see, Ella Longstreet could hardly have drunk from that cup of tea, if the medical examiner's estimate of the time of her death was accurate—

and at the most the medical examiner's report wouldn't be out more than an hour or so. We are forced to conclude that the cup of tea, and possibly also the stub of burnt-down cigarette, are plants placed in the room to confuse or mislead the investigators.

"So also may be another set of clues." The Inspector reached back of my grandmama's chair and pulled out the radiant electric heater and the boxful of ashes that he had had one of his assistants scoop up from the rug. "These would seem to say— 'Someone, probably Ella Longstreet, herself, burnt letters here.' But I think the voices of this evidence are both mute and moot." He looked at me as he committed this pun and nodded his head slightly. Arthur, at that moment, handed him his cup of tea and asked him what he liked in it.

"Aaa—yes. No, I mean nothing, please." The Inspector held up his hand. "There's also the cylinder of compressed air, which we've already mentioned—and I'll admit to you all that I'll be damned if I can see where *that* fits in—"

Eliot had just taken his first sip of tea. His eyes were half-closed as he rolled the liquid about on his tongue, clearly expecting to savor it. Suddenly, his eyes opened startlingly wide. His mouth gaped and at the same time his tongue and the swallow of tea were expelled—"Faugh!"

The Inspector jumped forward and knocked the cup that was at my mother's lips to the floor and into a thousand pieces with a swift blow. His eyes swept the room at the rest of us, all frozen with teacups in various positions—but none actually drinking the tea.

"No one will drink that stuff!" he cried. "It is heavily laced with poison."

He came over and took the cup I held shakily in my hand. "Miss Longstreet," he said, his tone unexpectedly admiring and respectful, "you are a monster!"

TEN

"I RESENT YOUR easy assumption that, because you claim to have found poison in the tea—and I prepared it with Arthur's assistance—I attempted to poison the lot of you, and Arthur is my accomplice." I spoke with spirit and con-

viction and I could see from the way his eyes gleamed that Arthur Crump seconded every word I had said. I felt cornered at that moment, a helpless creature caught in an impossible position who bared its fangs and prepared to defend itself with desperate bravery.

Inspector Eliot continued to sift the leaves of tea between his fingers, letting the fragrant stuff trickle back into the canister which he balanced between his long, sprawled legs. We had all followed him into the kitchen where he had located the canister and had immediately thrust his hand into it. He had lifted a handful of tea to his nose, had sniffed loudly several times and had tasted some of it with caution. "The faint, but distinct, the unmistakable aroma of *foxglove,*" he had said in a melodramatic whisper.

The kitchen, although a large room of its kind, had then been densely crowded with the various other members of my family. Each as curious as his neighbor, they had pressed in upon the Inspector, and Jasper had been so rash as to dip his hand into the canister to have a sniff for himself. Eliot had knocked down my brother's hand, spilling some of the tea upon the floor. "That is evidence," he had said, "and not to be tampered with." Then he had looked about himself and had added, "I believe that we are closer to knowing how Ella Longstreet died."

A few minutes later, he insisted that everyone leave the kitchen, save Arthur and myself. He told the rest of my family to return to the back drawing room and to await his further instructions, which they did but not without some grumbling. I had heard Maud say, "He's like all other policemen, after all, a petty tyrant."

Stephen Eliot had sat down upon a porcelain-topped table and had placed the canister of tea between his legs. The cup that still contained the remains of the tea that I had found by my grandmother's chair he had set upon the table beside him, as he had the ashtray containing the cigarette butt. One of his assistants had been called in to the kitchen and given the cup and ashtray, as well as a packetful of the suspect tea leaves themselves. "Send them down to the lab for analysis," the Inspector had said. He had made the packet from a sheet of notebook paper with ease and dexterity.

After the assistant had closed the swinging door upon him-

self, the Inspector had asked me why I had wanted to poison the rest of my family, Arthur Crump and himself as well. "Don't think that I fail to admire the audacity of your homicidal impulse, Miss Longstreet," he said in the same ironically deferent tone he had used before, "but your motive, for the present, is beyond my poor powers of comprehension. Your crime would surely have been discovered, what with my assistants all over the place. Unless, of course, there's some irrational explanation—"

It was then that I told him how much I resented his easy assumption that Arthur and I had attempted to poison a roomful of people.

"What would you have me think, Miss Longstreet? Your actions, from the beginning of my talks with you, have been characterized by a distressing lack of honesty. You had destroyed much of the evidence concerning your grandmother's death by the time I came on the scene. Had I been five minutes later—and had your accomplice, Mr. Crump, whom you so term yourself, succeeded in leaving the house without having been stopped for questioning by my assistants—you would have covered up every indication that your grandmother's death had been anything but ordinary. Aah—hmn."

I looked at Arthur and he smiled at me: his simple gesture gave me confidence. "I'll admit that I've behaved obtusely," I said, "but I assure you that at no time has anything I've done had a criminal intent. As to the tea leaves being poisoned —a fact for which I take your word since I have neither tasted nor smelt the tea—they are exactly as I found them when I came into the kitchen on your request."

"I don't doubt that, Miss Longstreet," Eliot replied smugly. "You'd hardly have had time to mix digitalis with tea, as thoroughly as these leaves have been mixed, in the short interval during which you were absent from the drawing room. But that doesn't rule out the possibility that you had adulterated the tea some time earlier."

"I had not visited this house for twelve years before today," I reminded Eliot.

"So you say—and let's say you say the mere truth," the Inspector responded. He had given up sieving the tea leaves and had gone back to his favorite fingering-piece—the cigar. "But, even so, we can't forget that you were seen to enter this

house at nine-nineteen this morning, and then to leave it in considerable haste at nine-twenty-four. And we must also remember that you were left alone in the house this afternoon, between the times of your accomplice's departure and my first meeting with you, for a considerable space of time in which you could have done much mischief. Beyond that, in view of the fact that you are sole beneficiary of your grandmother's estate, you stand to gain more than any other from her death, so far as we know."

Arthur stepped forward at that, his face flushed. I knew that he was angry and I was pleased that he suppressed his anger. "So far as you know, Inspector," he said equably. "Don't you think those words had damn well better be said again and thought about by you? It seems to me that you've come too far too fast."

"You interest me, Mr. Crump," Eliot said sincerely. "I wish you would continue. Daresay you might hit upon something I've missed."

"It isn't so much that you've missed anything as that you're too busy jumping at conclusions to see what's right before your eyes," Arthur exclaimed. "For one thing, until you've had that tea analyzed, you've no proof that it contains foxglove—or digitalis—you said both, you know—or anything but plain tea."

"It had the distinct acrid taste of the drug, Mr. Crump. It also had the faint aroma of foxglove. For your information *foxglove* is the plant and *digitalis* is the drug derived from its dried leaves. Indeed, it is a generic name for several such drugs, all of which have the characteristic effect upon the heart to slow it down, to steady it. But we needn't go into that."

"Neither have you proof," Arthur persisted, "that Ella Longstreet's drink of tea contained this drug—or, as you said yourself, that it had been drunk by the old lady. You may have proof after you get the results of the post mortem, but anything you say now is no more than a shrewd guess. And some of yours aren't so shrewd, let me tell you."

"You *are* telling me, Mr. Crump, and very well too. I accept both of your points and will humbly admit that I'm as often obtuse as shrewd. Do go on." The Inspector seemed to be enjoying himself and I had the queer feeling that Arthur was

about to blunder into another one of the investigator's ingenious traps.

"I will go on," Arthur said with the loudness of the recently deflated. I have often wondered why, when a man's argument has been punctured as might be a balloon, he so frequently insists on belaboring the metaphor by making a sound like a burst bag of air as well. Not that Arthur, who had entered the lists in my defense, had yet approached this extremity.

"By God, I will go on," were his next words."You keep on repeating that Abigail visited the house before the time she said she did, but you haven't yet even as much as questioned most of the others that were seen entering or leaving this place this morning. How can you decide that Abigail's your most logical suspect until you've questioned the others?"

"Again I must approve your point, and admire the fervor with which you have stated it," Eliot said. "Aah—hmn! Aah—yes! But, don't you see, the most logical suspect—a person, incidentally, who isn't necessarily the murderer in all cases—is rarely the most likely witness a poor working cop like myself can get to squeal?"

The man was talking gibberish. His verbal affectations, which sometimes I felt mocked my own respectable cadences, had been annoying me all afternoon. Now he dared use a word that could only have personal meaning for him—a trait I do not allow poets and certainly do not permit a detective. "If you are hoping to harass me until I squeal, Inspector, I must assure you that I am sufficiently a stoic to forbear imitating barnyard animals."

This mordant remark of mine had an amazing effect upon both men: they began to laugh uproariously. They continued to bellow for an indecent length of time, the Inspector clapping Arthur upon the back and Arthur pumping the Inspector's arm up and down. The Inspector so much lost control of himself that he threw his cigar onto the floor and trod upon it.

When at last they had quietened down, it was Arthur who chose to enlighten me. " 'To squeal,' " he told me, "is underworld slang meaning to give informaion against one's fellow criminals. The Inspector was only saying that, although he can't be sure that you're the most logical suspect for the murder of your grandmother, he felt that you were the one

who knew most about what had happened, and would be the easiest to get to tell what you knew."

"I suppose that when one goes out in the world, one must be prepared to hear the vernacular and to try to understand it," I said.

"That is very kind of you, Miss Longstreet," the Inspector said. "And since you and Mr. Crump have seen through my little artifice, I'll be straightforward with you. Isn't it so that you knew that such a dose of digitalis as was contained in that tea would induce severe nausea in those who drank it? And that you hoped to gain a diversion by making us all sick?"

Arthur broke in before I could answer. "Are you admitting now, Inspector, that the poison in the tea, even if drunk, wouldn't have killed anyone?"

"That is the fact," Eliot said, "although I don't consider it an admission. Nor do I know whether Miss Longstreet herself knows the circumstances under which an overdosage of digitalis would prove fatal. That, in my poor way, is what I'm trying to determine."

"Why don't you ask her right out then?" Arthur replied, his features stiff and his dark eyes flashing.

"Very well, I shall. Miss Longstreet, can you tell me how much digitalis would be a lethal dose, how long it would take to act—and what symptoms it would induce in the person unfortunate enough to swallow it?"

"I know nothing about the drug," I said, "except its medical name and the fact that very old people often are given it for their heart trouble. Incidentally—I had quite forgotten—that day when Mabel visited me she mentioned the fact that my grandmother had suffered several heart attacks and had refused to call Dr. Phillips."

"Why didn't you say something about this before?" Eliot asked. He ran his hand through his thinning hair in exasperation.

"As I said, I had quite forgotten about it. I didn't credit anything the girl said at the time. If grandmama had needed a doctor, she would have written me to have one call."

"Isn't it possible," Arthur asked, "that your grandmother, or one of her servants, did call a doctor without your knowing it?" Arthur's tone was an excited one, as if he were suddenly on the trail of something.

"It is possible," I said, "but not likely. So far as I know, grandmama had no contact with the outside world except through me. And, judging from the state of this kitchen, as well as the rest of the house, the last of her servants must have left some time ago."

"Now you're saying it," Arthur said—*"so far as you know.* You didn't know that the other family members had keys to the gate and the house either, but the fact that they visited here this morning proves that they did."

Inspector Eliot gave Arthur a brief, glowing smile. "A good point. An excellent point, Mr. Crump." The Inspector turned to me. "Your belief that you were your grandmother's sole contact with the rest of the family and the world was a mistaken one, Miss Longstreet. After having a chat with your mother, I discovered that, on occasion, Ella Longstreet wrote to Mrs. Presscott—and possibly to others as well. In fact, the last time Ella wrote your mother, one of the subjects of her letter was you."

I did not want to believe him and my look must have shown my incredulity, because the Inspector allowed one of his eyebrows to lift perceptibly. "What did Lizbeth say about me?" I demanded.

"Your mother said that Ella Longstreet complained of your narrowness and even suspected your loyalty," the Inspector had lowered his voice, but he spoke with quiet emphasis.

"She is lying," I said. "Grandmama trusted no one but myself." I glanced at Arthur, appealed to him with my eyes, but his expression was unexpectedly withdrawn as though he did not know how to take what Stephen Eliot had just said.

"I suspected, at first, that Mrs. Presscott might have her own reasons for discrediting you," the Inspector said. "But then she showed me this letter which she received in yesterday's mail. It's the same letter that was the occasion for her visit this morning. You'll see that it's rather convincing."

He had pulled the over-sized notebook from his pocket once more, had leafed through it and stopped at a page on which a letter had been placed but not as yet pasted. "For a lady who was supposed to have been a recluse," he said, "Ella Longstreet is developing into a remarkable correspondent." He handed the letter to me.

I saw at once that the letter was on my grandmother's

notepaper and in the same handwriting, a distinctive copperplate script, as the note Arthur had brought me that morning and the message to the police commissioner that Eliot had showed me. It was dated the day before, so it must have been mailed during the early morning. I read it with shock and disbelief:

Dear Daughter,

May I request an appointment with you tomorrow at half-past nine in the morning? I have reason to believe that I can not trust Abigail in some things and there is a family matter of grave importance which I must discuss. Does the name Albert mean anything to you? And have you seen Sybil of late?

Affectionately, your mother

ELLA MAYBELLE LONGSTREET

"Would you say it was a forgery?" the Inspector asked as I still held the document in my shaking hands.

I shook my head. "I am not an expert on handwriting," I said, "but it does appear to be in my grandmother's hand." I tried to look at the paper again, but the lines blurred and ran together before my eyes. "I was always so . . . so proud to know . . . that she trusted me," I said.

"No one ever trusts anyone in all things," the Inspector said sympathetically. "And your grandmother didn't say that she mistrusted you in everything—only in some things."

"But what—w-what could grandmama have trusted Lizbeth in that she could not trust me in?" I asked.

"That was what I hoped you could tell me, Miss Longstreet," Eliot said.

"Didn't Mrs. Presscott tell you?" Arthur asked. He had moved over so that he stood part of the way between Stephen Eliot and myself. Arthur had strong protective instincts and I liked him for them.

"I believe she told me all that happened during her talk with her mother this morning," Eliot said, although his words lacked some of their usual conviction. "But though I've mulled over what she told me, it doesn't as yet answer the question I have just asked."

"I'd like to know what Mrs. Presscott said," Arthur insisted. "You are forever beating around the bush."

Arthur's tone was surly, but Eliot did not take offense. I felt that he liked Arthur too, although I knew that with the Inspector personal liking would not influence his judgment. "You've heard Mrs. Presscott speak, haven't you? Well, just in case you hadn't noticed, her talk sometimes comes perilously close to what the psychologists call a flight of ideas. She rattles and flutters and switches from one topic to another. I took down what I could, but it isn't too coherent. And I may have missed some allusion or other—or perhaps a word or a phrase. As it strikes me now, the conversation is a puzzle with one piece missing. And that piece might not be missing—what I mean is, well, it could be that there's a piece or so too much."

"You aren't being very clear," I told the Inspector.

"Aah-hmn. It isn't the sort of thing one can be very clear about, as you'll soon see," the Inspector said. He paused again. This time I felt his hesitance was genuine, that he really preferred not to try to repeat to us Lizbeth's account of her last visit with my grandmama.

"Get on with it," Arthur said. I could sympathize with Arthur's impatience as well as Eliot's hesitance.

"I think I'd better," the Inspector said. "Mrs. Presscott told me that she arrived a little late for her appointment, a fact that coincides with Officer McHugh's observation that she entered the house at twenty-five minutes to ten. Upon entering the great hall her first impression was that the place was deserted. She called out and she thought she heard her mother's voice feebly respond. She went down the hall, calling out repeatedly—and each time the response seemed less feeble. She went into the back drawing room and there found your grandmother, Miss Longstreet, sitting in her favorite chair. The room was dim. She had some letters in her lap, a fact that puzzled your mother because she understood that Ella Longstreet was blind."

"Grandmama was blind," I said. "I know that is a fact."

"Evidently," the Inspector agreed. "It was one of the first things the medical examiner noticed, one of my assistants has informed me."

Arthur interrupted the Inspector. "I hadn't thought of it

until now," he said, "but if Ella Longstreet was blind, how could she write so neatly?"

"Grandmama learned to write many years ago when she was not blind. She also had great personal discipline. Except for a slight uphill tendency towards the ends of lines—which as the years advanced became invariable—her spacing was regular and her characters precisely formed," I replied.

"That's really remarkable," Arthur said. Somehow I felt he was not being sincere and I had not noticed this lack in him before.

"It's more than that, I believe," said the Inspector. He was hunting through the pages of his bulky notebook again. He took his time, but finally he withdrew the three specimens of my grandparent's handwriting that he had gathered: the note to me, the letter to the commissioner and the letter to my mother.

"This *is* fascinating," he sighed, after having compared them one to the other for several minutes. "In two out of three cases there isn't the slightest uphill tendency at any point in any line. In the third, the note to you, Miss Longstreet, the lines are so short that such a tendency wouldn't be visible. What do you make of that?"

"Let me see the letters," I said. Arthur peered over my shoulder while I read them. "As I said before, I know nothing about the art of calligraphy and its analysis, but now that this discrepancy has been called to my attention I doubt that my grandmother wrote any of these letters. They must be clever forgeries."

"Are you sure?" the Inspector inquired.

"Of course not. It is only an opinion."

Eliot took the letters back and filed them away in his pocket filing case. "There we are," he said. "Could be—might not be. Still, it does open the case up a bit. Now, all other things considered, should a likely suspect have a hand like your grandmother's he becomes likelier."

"Or should a suspect have examples of earlier attempts at imitating her hand," Arthur said. "In his desk, perhaps—or stuck away in an old blotter."

Stephen Eliot raised his eyebrows. "Dear fellow, that would take a search warrant—and the mere issuance of one would raise a terrible row in a case like this. And do you really think

that if anyone had drilled himself in writing like Ella, he would have been careless enough to leave his 'prentice efforts lying about?"

"I suppose not," Arthur said. "Still, it's a thought. But let's get back to Mrs. Presscott's account of her conversation with the murdered woman this morning."

The Inspector nodded his head and tensed his lips. "I do suppose we had better get that over with," he said. "Daresay it is loaded with precious evidence, but yet I don't know." He shuddered slightly.

"Well, to get on with it—as you said. Mrs. Presscott informed me that as soon as she was seated opposite Ella Longstreet, the old lady began the conversation with a question. She asked, 'Have you seen Sybil lately?'

" 'Only the other night,' Lizbeth replied. 'She and Eddie are great friends and have long chats together at Madame Biencolil's. You'll be pleased to know, mother, that our Sybil has taken up the samba. She says she much prefers it to the waltz.' "

Arthur had begun to smile. I did not smile, but I thought the Inspector's imitation of my mother both wicked and accurate. "You see what I mean," Eliot said, "to give you any account of this I must go on like that. Yackety-yak, as they say, yackety-yak."

"I think you should go on," Arthur said.

"I asked Mrs. Presscott what her mother had said to that. She replied, 'Mother said she had been "visited" several times —I gathered it had been more often than she wished—by Sybil herself. And then mother said a dreadful thing. She said she hadn't ever believed in Sybil before, but now she wasn't so sure.'

" 'I said, "Well, thank God for that!" Then mother changed the subject. She asked me if I knew a young man named Albert D'Yvetot who had come to New York lately. I said, "No, but was he any relation to Sybil?" She wouldn't answer that, but changed the subject again and said that she had set up some kind of a trust or other that left all her money to my daughter, Abigail, who has no concept of the proper use of money. I got angry at that and left the house at once. And that's everything I know about it,' Mrs. Presscott ended. I asked her a few more questions, but that is all she said

about the interview this morning." The Inspector was obviously pleased that he had finished with my mother.

"But I've a question to ask you," I said. "I heard mother say that Jasper had threatened to kill my grandmother. Did Lizbeth expand on that?"

"Only after I asked her several close quesions," Stephen Eliot replied. He opened his cigar case, looked thoughtfully at the one cigar remaining in it, and then shut it dolefully. "Jasper did come to see her last night," he went on. "It seems that he had been after your grandmother to finance the purchase of some marble for his wife, Shirley, the sculptress."

"That again!" I exclaimed. "I thought that silly idea had been forgotten a year ago. But if he asked her for more money, the request didn't pass through my hands. I should have suppressed it."

The Inspector nodded his head. "Which was what I thought. Thus we have another bit of evidence that your grandmother was more often in touch with other members of your family than you had supposed."

"I can hardly deny it," I said. "At least it seems to be so."

Arthur had been listening intently, while sucking at his underlip—a childish mannerism which I disliked. "What about the floor?" he asked.

"The floor?"

"Didn't you question Mrs. Presscott concerning the condition of the floor in the great hall? Was it dusty?"

"Aah-yes. Yes, I did ask that question. Mrs. Presscott said that between twenty-five minutes to ten and a quarter to the hour—the brief while she was in the house—the floor was clean and she saw no footprints."

Arthur could not keep from looking at me. I smiled at him, hoping to hide the trepidation I felt.

"And I have a question to ask you, Miss Longstreet," the Inspector said. "Who is Albert D'Yvetot?"

ELEVEN

"I DID SAY that my grandmother needed killing," Jasper admitted, "and I also said that I was probably the only one of us who would dare to do it." He leaned back against the

refrigerator, his slight body entirely relaxed, his lips twisted into a condescending grimace. "What I don't get is why mater thought my remark worth repeating. I think you'll find that each of us has said something of the sort at one time or another. Except for you, Abigail—the shining and perfect." Jasper did not like me and I did not like him. The difference in our manner to each other lay in the fact that I at all times tried to conceal my distaste for my brother and he took every opportunity to display his animosity for me.

Inspector Stephen Eliot still sat on the kitchen table, his long legs stretched to the tiled floor like dividers measuring a gap. When I had told him that I had never heard of the existence of an Albert D'Yvetot—and if there were such a person he must belong to a branch of the family unknown to me—the Inspector had gone to the door and asked one of his assistants to tell Jasper Longstreet that he was wanted in the kitchen. Arthur Crump had drawn up a chair and had sat upon it, lighting his pipe and sucking on its stem thoughtfully.

Jasper had slouched into the room, his hands in his pockets, an insolent expression on his face. He had ignored me, stared at Arthur Crump and said to Inspector Eliot, "I'm ready for the inquisition."

The Inspector had immediately asked him about the remark he had made to Lizbeth. It was typical of Jasper that he should defend his own rashness by impugning the entire family. It did not sit well with Eliot.

"I'm not interested in your opinion of whether the others spoke of killing your grandmoher," Stephen Eliot said, speaking quickly and with more heat than I had thought he possessed. "I want to know if you killed her?"

Jasper shrugged his shoulders. "I wish I had. It is an experience that would have enriched my life."

"This is not the time for humor, Mr. Longstreet," the Inspector said severely. "If you take this tone with me, I shall have to doubt all you say."

"That's entirely your affair," Jasper said. His indifference was reprehensible.

Eliot regarded him silently. It was a scrutiny that I think I might have wilted under, but Jasper found it the appropriate occasion to inspect and to huff upon his fingernails. "How did

you come to visit your grandmother this morning?" Eliot finally asked.

"I got a letter from her yesterday. It asked me to come to the house at ten-thirty this morning. When I opened the envelope, the keys fell out."

"May I see the letter?"

"It's like all the others."

"What makes you say that?"

"Just a guess. The others did get letters like mine, didn't they?" Jasper's confidence had wavered slightly, although it might have been my imagination.

Eliot did not answer. He continued to regard my brother and Jasper slowly took a several times folded square of notepaper from his pocket. He handed it to Eliot, who read it and passed it along to me. The paper was dirtied with thumbmarks and tobacco crumbs; it had been folded carelessly and torn in one place. I knew that any piece of paper that had the misfortune to fall into Jasper's hands would look the same. The handwriting seemed to be my grandmother's, although again no line went uphill at the margin. I read the note aloud so Arthur could know its message:

"Dear Grandson Jasper,

I may have been too harsh with you. If you can call at the house promptly at ten-thirty tomorrow morning, it may be possible to arrange for the purchase of the marbles. Sybil sends her love.

Affectionately, your grandmother,
ELLA MAYBELLE LONGSTREET"

I gave the letter back to Inspector Eliot. "Is your opinion the same as before?" he asked elliptically.

I took it that he meant to inquire as to the authenticity of the handwriting without letting Jasper know it had been questioned. "Yes, I think so," I said.

"What did you make of this note?" Eliot then asked my brother.

"I thought the old gal was cracked—not that I hadn't thought so for some time. That line about Sybil. If Abigail hasn't told you already, Sybil's the family spook."

The Inspector nodded his head. "Why do you think your

grandmother mentioned Sybil to you in so short a note?"

Jasper smiled crookedly. "Like I said, she was cracked. Who can tell what goes on in a lunatic's mind?"

The Inspector changed his tack. His tone was still not friendly, but it had lost some of its former severity. "I take it that the business about the marbles refers to some previous talk you had with your grandmother?" he asked.

Jasper looked quickly at me and then back to Eliot. "Haven't my mother and my sister told you about that already?"

"They have referred to it, but I'd rather hear what you have to say."

"It wasn't a talk I had," Jasper said sulkily. "An exchange of letters with my perfect prig of a sister acting as go-between and censor. She read everything that any of us sent to grandmother, you know."

"Can you tell me more about this exchange of letters?" Eliot asked.

"There isn't much to it. My wife's a sculptress and last year she decided to work in marble. The stuff is damn expensive. I asked Ella for some more money—through dearest Abigail, of course—and grandmama said no. At least, the note in grandmama's handwriting that Abigail forwarded to me said no."

"Are you implying that your sister might have forged the note?" the Inspector asked.

I had been annoyed ever since Jasper had slouched into the kitchen, now I was angry. I could feel my pulse beat in my throat and my cheeks felt as if they were on fire. By clenching my hands I controlled myself.

"I've always suspected that she's done that trick more than once," Jasper said to the Inspector, while looking at me. He knew that I knew he thought nothing of the sort. Jasper was only playing another one of his malicious jokes. As long as I could remember, my brother has seized upon his every chance to make his fellow beings uncomfortable. "And I'm not the only one who has thought so," he went on to say—"just ask any of the others."

The Inspector had his large notebook out again and was scribbling in it rapidly. When he looked up I could not catch his eyes—his attention was devoted to my brother.

"You kept this letter from your grandmother?" Eliot asked.

Jasper shook his head negligently. "I threw it away. If I'd known it might be evidence—" He spread his hands in mock resignation.

The Inspector gave him another long look. "I should think that if you had suspected your sister of so serious an offense, you would have been careful to have saved the letter?"

"I'm a careless person, Inspector."

I do not think Eliot believed him. I glanced at Arthur, but he was hidden behind a cloud of foul smoke. I felt alone and defenseless and I grew more angry.

"You were never a favorite of your grandmother's, were you, Mr. Longstreet?" the Inspector asked.

"I never sucked up to her, if that's what you're asking?"

"It wasn't what I was asking, but it is an answer of a sort." Eliot passed his long-fingered hand slowly over his slab-like chin. I was reminded of a group of climbers, linked together, creeping over the face of a mountain. "Who were her favorites?" the Inspector asked.

"Her great favorite was the lilymaid over there—my charming sister, Abigail." Jasper's voice oozed with sarcasm. "But I think Maud was a favorite too, until lately, when grandmama found out about her and Edward."

"What about Maud and Edward?" The Inspector had leaned forward slightly, an interested expression on his features.

"Well, you really can't blame Maud, being married to a non-entity like Oliver. I'm sure their life together is—unsatisfactory. And Edward was available. Lizbeth spends all her time with Madame Biencolil now—there's a prime fake if there ever was one!—and even when Edward married her she was nearly twenty years older than him. She is in her upper fifties now—you wouldn't think it to look at her, would you?—and Edward hasn't turned forty yet. Even so, had I been Maud I'd've been a little more choosy."

"You mean Maud and Edward are having an affair?" the Inspector asked.

And they say women gossip!

"He has a bachelor apartment in the Murray Hill neighborhood and she has a key to it," Jasper said slyly. "A gold key with his initials engraved on it. If I were having an affair with

a married man, I wouldn't take the risk, would you? Especially when the man was my own step-father?"

I could stand it no longer. "It is all a lie," I cried. "Jasper is a terrible liar, Inspector. No one can ever believe a word he says."

"Think so, Snow White?" Jasper said. "Well, then what about this?" He had taken a key, a gold-plated key, out of his pocket and pitched it towards the Inspector who caught it in his cupped hands. Eliot took the key and examined it. Even from where I was I could read the letters engraved upon it—E.P.

"Where did you get that?" I asked.

"Pinched it out of Maud's purse just now, when she was too busy looking at Edward. Thought it might come in handy," Jasper said easily.

"And you say your grandmother found out about this affair your sister was having?" the Inspector asked. "And that caused Maud to fall from her favor?"

"That's right."

"Tell me, Mr. Longstreet, frankly, isn't that a mere supposition on your part? How could you know?" Stephen Eliot asked. I saw the gold flecks glimmer in his brown eyes and I knew he was onto something.

"It wasn't a supposition. I know it's a fact," Jasper said with his usual self-satisfaction.

"You couldn't be certain that such a thing was a fact," the Inspector said, pronouncing his words slowly and heavily, "unless, of course, you told your grandmother about your sister and your step-father yourself?"

"As a matter of fact I did," Jasper said. "I thought she ought to know some of the interesting details of family life that my sister Abigail kept from her."

I had suspected that Edward and Maud were having an affair. All of us knew about it, because they had behaved most incautiously, except Lizbeth and Oliver. It seems the people most concerned are always the last to hear bad news of this kind. But I did not believe it was my function to relay gossip against my other relatives to my grandmother. I was to be neutral and impartial—or so I had understood my role.

"How could you do such a thing?" I exclaimed. My brother had a talent for horrifying me.

"Easy enough, sister mine," Jasper sneered. "I lack your moral sense—I do what I like."

Eliot listened to our exchange, turning his head to look at each of us as we spoke.

"That is not what I meant, Jasper," I said. "I meant to say how could you have informed against Maud and Edward when all communications to grandmama passed through me?"

"It occurred to me one day that there was nothing to stop me, sis," was his reply. "This house has a mailbox like any other, hasn't it?—and an address. I just wrote her a letter, that's all. And I'll bet you that most of the others have done the same thing at one time or another when they were fed up with your high-and-mighty ways."

"You—you informer!" I cried.

"Aah-hmn!" the Inspector said with a curious vehemence for such a meaningless interjection. "I won't say this isn't interesting—and some of it may even contribute to unravelling the pretty puzzle of your grandmother's death—but I've certain other questions to ask you, young man." Eliot sighted down his long nose at Jasper Longstreet.

Jasper smiled at him. "Fire away," he said. "Bring on the thumb screws and the rack. Pile high the faggots." His levity, as was inevitable, was in bad taste.

"You let yourself in the front gate to this house at ten twenty-nine this morning, didn't you?" the Inspector said.

"My watch said ten-thirty," Jasper disagreed.

"You stayed in the house until quarter to eleven. During this time you kept a taxi waiting, so you must not have intended to remain even that long?"

Jasper nodded his head. "You're so right. I was detained."

"Why were you detained?" the Inspector asked.

"It was the first dead body I'd ever seen and I paused to collect my impressions." Jasper, when he wants to, can put on a straight face and a meek manner. He chose this moment to do just that.

I do not think Eliot had expected to learn that Ella Longstreet had been dead at ten tweny-nine, although I sensed he was not entirely unprepared. His face showed little emotion—what there was seemed to indicate vexation—but he hesitated before asking his next question.

"Do I understand you to say that you found your grandmother dead at ten twenty-nine?" he asked.

"You're so right."

"Where did you find the body?"

"Lying face up in the hall."

"Was the floor dusty?"

"Clean as a whistle."

"How did you know she was dead?"

"I did all the usual things. I took her pulse. Listened for her heartbeat. Checked her eye reflexes. If I'd had a mirror, I'd've held it to her mouth to see if it would mist. I go to the movies too." Jasper was enjoying himself. I was surprised that Inspector Eliot allowed him to be so jocular.

"How long would you say she had been dead?" was Eliot's next question.

"Couldn't say. I'm not a doctor. But she was still warm."

His answer set Eliot to scribbling in his notebook again. When he looked up, he said, "You're sure you didn't kill her?"

"Positive. What would be my motive? She was about to come around to my point of view and give me a couple of extra thou for Shirley's marbles. Why should I bump her off at such a delicate time? It would be cutting my own throat, Inspector." Jasper sounded earnest. He wanted to convince the Inspector he was innocent.

"You might have taken a longer view," Stephen Eliot said quietly. "With your grandmother dead, you would have been in for a larger bequest under her will. Isn't that how you understand it?"

Jasper opened his mouth, his tongue came out and wet his lips. "You—you could look at it that way. But I didn't do it. All the others had the same motive. Even my darling sister had the same motive." He looked at me and I could see the idea forming in his mind. "Since she was teacher's pet," he said slowly, arrogantly, "she's probably due to get more than any of the rest of us. Yes, I think so, Abigail—I wouldn't put it past you."

Eliot was writing in his notebook and he did not appear to be listening. "It was you who dressed your grandmother in a Bikini, wasn't it, Mr. Longstreet?" he asked without raising his head.

The Inspector's question ruined my brother's cheeky pose. "How did you know about that?" he gasped.

"My assistant saw you go in with a package, but you didn't return with one. He chatted with the taxi-driver while you were in the house and the cabby said he had picked you up in front of Bergdoff-Goodman." Eliot still had not looked up.

"You didn't tell me about that detail," I said to the Inspector.

"Didn't I? I'm so sorry. Well, Mr. Longstreet?"

Jasper gulped as if he were having difficulty breathing. "I couldn't leave her lying there nude like that," he said.

"When you found your grandmother's body it was nude?" Eliot asked. "Did I understand you correctly?"

"That's right. She didn't have a thing on. I can tell you I was—I was shocked. And then I was sorry for her. She was so thin—and so ugly." To my intense surprise, tears, real tears, welled into Jasper's eyes.

"Her body was emaciated," the Inspector agreed. "But then old women often are thin. It's part of age."

Jasper shook his head. "She looked like she'd been in Buchenwald," Jasper said.

"And what did you do?"

"As I told you. I took her pulse and listened for her heart. It didn't seem right for me, a man, her grandson, to be looking at her like that. I went upstairs to her room to get something to cover her and there were no clothes—only a shroud. I couldn't use *that.* And even the bed was stripped.

"And then I remembered the package I had under my arm. It was something for Shirley that she bought at Bergdoff-Goodman and had asked me to pick up. I didn't know what it was but at least it would cover her. When I opened the box and saw it was a swimming suit—a Bikini—I swore a bloody streak."

"And then what did you do?" the Inspector asked.

"I went downstairs and put it on her. It was a little too big. What would you have done?" Jasper had become defiant and for the first time in many years I felt like a sister to him.

"Why didn't you call the police?" Eliot asked.

"You may not believe it," Jasper answered, "but I didn't think of it as murder. I needed time to decide what I thought."

Eliot closed his notebook with a loud snap. "One more

question, Mr. Longstreet, and then you may ask your wife to come in. Who do you think killed your grandmother?"

My brother looked at the investigator a long time and then he shook his head. "I don't know," he said soberly. "I don't know that anyone did. Couldn't she have died a natural death?"

But from the way he said it all of us knew that he thought it was impossible himself.

He slouched out the door a moment later, saying over his shoulder—"I'll send Shirley right in."

The door had closed when the Inspector called out, "Mr. Longstreet—Jasper!—I'm sorry, but just one more question."

The door opened slowly and Jasper came back into the room—reluctantly, it seemed to me.

"Do you know an Albert D'Yvetot?" Eliot asked.

Jasper shook his head. I saw a glint in his eyes and the smirk returned to his lips. "Can't say I do," he said, "unless, of course there is another poltergeist."

TWELVE

SHIRLEY LONGSTREET was ready for the Inspector. Her walk announced this fact as she strode into the kitchen, arms swinging, her sensible brown oxfords coming down with smart thwacks upon the tiled floor. Shirley was tall, well-formed and handsome in a way that seemed to me unwomanly; but then my conception of feminine beauty is based on the standards of a more rational day. She did have lustrous, heavy, brown hair that hung in a long bob and brushed her squared shoulders. She wore a long-sleeved cashmere sweater that was haphazardly buttoned and a suede skirt that would have seemed stylish in the Forest of Arden. The men in the family tell me her legs are good—they are certainly as tanned as any Indian's.

"You wanted to see me?" she asked Eliot gruffly. Shirley's voice is in the contralto range and she cultivates a burr. All in all an unlikely woman for sly, willowy Jasper to have married. But then she was his third wife; I suppose this makes a difference.

"I've a few questions which, if you will be good enough to

answer them, may help us clear up some of the circumstances surrounding Ella Longstreet's death," the Inspector said. His eyelids had hooded his eyes and it was difficult for me to tell how he was taking Shirley.

"Glad to help," Shirley said. She tapped a cigarette against her wrist, pushed it into her mouth and struck a match against her sueded backside before Eliot had his lighter out.

"You visited this house this morning?" the Inspector asked.

"That I did," said Shirley—"towards the end of the morning. If you want to look at this, you may—I hear you've asked Jasper to see his." She had a note from grandmother balled up in her hand and she tossed it to the Inspector. "A key was enclosed," she said.

While he was unrolling and studying this latest example of one of grandmother's summonses, Eliot asked another question. "You entered the house at eleven o'clock and left by nine minutes after, didn't you?"

"Spying, eh? Well, it's good to know the police are on their toes. Yes, those would be about the right times."

The Inspector had finished reading the note and he handed it to me. This time Arthur bestirred himself to the extent of standing up and walking to my side so that he might read it also:

Dear Shirley,

Could you visit me at eleven o'clock tomorrow morning? I have an important matter to discuss that concerns both you and your husband. You won't mind if Sybil is present, I trust?

Affectionately,
ELLA MAYBELLE LONGSTREET.

"I'd never heard of Sybil" Shirley said. "Jasper isn't much of a one to talk to me about the family skeletons—nor am I inclined to encourage that kind of confidence."

It was a different side of my brother from any I had known and I almost said so. Discretion sealed my lips.

"You know about Sybil now?" the Inspector asked.

"I asked Jasper about her. He said she was a poltergeist. I looked the word up in the dictionary—it's some kind of a ghost. I don't believe in ghosts and I told Jasper so. He said

that maybe grandma was dotty. I asked should I show up? He said what's the harm. So I found her dead. It was very unpleasant and now I've wasted a whole day. Pigment doesn't wait your pleasure, you know. I may have to scrap the canvas."

She had spoken quickly, if not peremptorily. Her eyebrows were heavy and dark—brown arcs—and her eyes, equally brown, roved beneath them. As she talked she took her cigarette from her lips and made small, stabbing motions with it. It was as if there were a coiled spring in her.

"I understood you to say that you found Ella Longstreet dead?" the Inspector asked.

"Lying in the great hall in a Bikini," Shirley said. "I took her pulse. There wasn't any. First time I'd been in the hall, though, and I stood and gaped at it. Gave me the willies. That long, curving staircase with no one going up or down it. Those pictures turned to the wall. I'd probably have liked it less if I could have seen them—most American portraiture of that period is atrocious."

"How was the floor?"

"It wasn't dusty, if that's what you want? Clean as it is now."

"Why didn't you call the police?" Eliot asked.

"I wasn't going to be the one to let the family in for publicity."

"This is a difficult question, Mrs. Longstreet, since you did not get to talk to the old lady. But can you give me any idea why Ella wanted to see you this morning?" Eliot asked. His manner, ever since Shirley had come into the room, had been polite and distant. It was almost as if his mind were working on another problem while he carried on the interview.

"I've thought a lot about that," Shirley said. Her speech was not so clipped and gruff. "The old girl must've gotten wind of the divorce."

I could not contain myself. "What divorce?" I asked. Even Arthur, who had returned to his kitchen chair and was leaning backwards in it, looked with interest at Shirley.

"The divorce I'm getting from Jasper. All set to go to Mexico next month. It's a business agreement; Jasper quite approves. He couldn't get me the money for my marbles so I have to have my freedom. No sense in being married if your

husband can't buy marbles. We'll continue to be good friends. But I was a fool to have talked to Lizbeth and Maud. The woman in me, I suppose. Comes out at the most unexpected times. And now I've got poor Jezebel in a mess. He didn't do it, you know, Inspector?" She tried to be demure at this last question—and in my opinion failed. The Inspector may have been taken in, though. You can never tell about men.

"Who is Jezebel?" Arthur asked.

"Jasper of course. I call him that—a pet name, you might say," Shirley replied.

"But why?"

"Because he reminds me of Jezebel, that's why."

It seemed an improper name for one's husband to me, and so I think it did to Arthur. The Inspector did not appear interested. "You feel that Mrs. Presscott or Maud Longstreet may have told the old lady that you were going to divorce her grandson?"

"Something like that. Why else should she want to talk to me? In her time divorces were frowned on, I suppose." Shirley took a last deep draft of her cigarette and then flicked the coal off with her fingernail. It fell harmlessly upon the tiled floor.

"Did you know that Jasper had an appointment to see his grandmother at ten-thirty this morning?" the Inspector asked.

"So he told me."

"Did he tell you that in the note to him Ella Longstreet implied that she was ready to give him money for your marbles?"

Shirley's face lost color. "Good Lord, no! You aren't kidding?"

"I have the letter right here."

"Oh, I believe you." She pursed her lips and whistled once, a low, pleasant tone. "Tell me something, Inspector—now that his grandmother's dead will he be coming into an inheritance?"

"You think he could have murdered his grandmother to get money to buy you marbles and stave off a divorce?" the Inspector asked coldly.

"Now look here, I don't think anything of the sort. Jezebel wouldn't hurt a fly. He's only silly in a sort of sweet way. I'd as soon be married to him as any man—and he knows it—but being married is my one way of getting pigment and

marbles. It'll be years before I have a reputation and then more years before I can sell enough to live on and buy supplies. Jasper understands—I'm sure he does. But he wouldn't kill his grandmother—I know he wouldn't."

To me it sounded as if Shirley were trying to persuade herself. I wondered what Eliot thought and again I tried to read his expression, but without success.

"What about yourself, Mrs. Longstreet?" he asked.

"Myself? You mean would I have killed her to get money for marbles? What an idea!"

"You haven't answered my question," the Inspector said.

"I told you before that when I arrived at the house she was already dead. She was lying there in the hall—it looked like she had just stopped breathing. Couldn't she have died of old age?" Shirley seemed to be fighting off anger.

"You didn't kill her?"

"You want me to say no in so many words?—is that it? All right. No, I didn't kill her. And neither did Jasper." She found another cigarette in one of the pockets of her sweater and began to tamp it irritably against her wrist.

"Do you know an Albert D'Yvetot?" Eliot asked.

"Sounds like a name out of French romance," she countered. "No—who is he?"

"Did you find the merchandise you bought at Bergdoff-Goodman acceptable for your purpose?" the Inspector asked.

Shirley stared at him and went on tamping the cigarette. "Is that what this is all about? You certainly go roundabout, don't you? I don't like it. I don't like it at all."

"What don't you like, Mrs. Longstreet?" Stephen Eliot asked.

"I don't like the way you go roundabout. If you wanted to know if it was my Bikini the poor old girl was wearing when I found her why didn't you just ask? It was—if that's what you want. But don't you go jumping to the conclusion that it was Jezebel who killed her—if anyone did, which I personally doubt. I don't know why he put my Bikini on her. I haven't had the chance to ask him. It may even have been his idea of a joke. But it isn't for any of the reasons you think."

"Thank you, Mrs. Longstreet. That will be all," the Inspector said. There was nothing she could do but leave. She

strode out as she came in, except that she was still nervously tamping the cigarette against her wrist.

After the door had closed upon Shirley, the Inspector laid down his notebook and looked at Arthur and myself. His face had relaxed into his usual expression, a kind of patient inquisitiveness. "I don't like that woman," he said.

"I've never liked her," I agreed.

"She seemed all right to me," said Arthur. "Why else would anyone marry Jasper except for money?"

"That's only part of it," the Inspector said. "The rest of it is harder to say, but if I'm to get my thinking straight I'm going to say it." He passed his hand over his jaw, tugging at the tip of his chin experimentally. "There's a kind of woman that is about today—and Shirley belongs to this kind—that knows exactly where she wants to go and knows that she is going there. She looks at love, marriage, art or science, as only means to an end. Each time I meet one of them, I realize that she knows what her end is—but that I don't. And perhaps I won't ever." He was disconsolate.

"Shirley's goal appears to be obvious enough to me. She wants to be a great painter and a great sculptress," Arthur said.

I shook my head. I knew what the Inspector was referring to, although I doubted that I should have been able to put my feelings into words even as cogently as he had. "That may be where Shirley says she is going," I said, "but even Shirley knows her art is window dressing."

"Aah-hmn! Window dressing. It comes back to that. So much of this case is window dressing," the Inspector mused. "When you try to dig down for the hard, straight line that will inevitably lead to the heart of the enigma, what do you find? More complications, more excrescences—more window dressing."

"Well, what do you think Shirley is after?" Arthur asked.

"If I knew I'd tell you," Eliot said. "It may not have anything to do with Ella Longstreet's death—then again it may. It's as if that woman had a trouble, a pain, she carried about with her and her sole goal was to ease it. Not that it's sex she's after—that's only a secondary consideration with her. Or money—though money is a first consideration. She has

something she has to prove to herself—that's her goal. Or is it?"

We sat silently, each of us avoiding the other's face. After a while the Inspector went to the door and told the man outside it that he was ready to see Maud Derwent.

Maud is my sister and the one member of my family I can tolerate. If I were older than she, I might love her. As it is, although I do not dislike her, I resent the subtle authority she thinks she has over me.

She is a shy woman, despite or perhaps because of her large body. She stood in the doorway for a long moment, awkwardly pushing back the door that kept closing on her, while Inspector Eliot regarded her. At last he had to say, "Won't you please come in, Mrs. Derwent?"

Maud came through the door then and tried to walk quickly to the kitchen chair that Arthur held out for her. She had done up her hair another way since the last time I saw her; Maud is always fussing with her red-gold hair, the same color and quality as my own, which is her only really good feature.

When she sat down her skirt rode up above her knees and she tugged at it hastily. Her face is large-featured and rather stolid in expression; before you know her, you are apt to think her stupid. And you would never expect her to have the most impulsive, as well as the most analytical, mind of any living Longstreet.

"I wonder if you could answer a few questions, Mrs. Derwent?" the Inspector asked to put her at ease.

"That depends on the questions," she said, smiling slowly at him. "I'll do my best."

"At what time did you visit your grandmother this morning?" Eliot asked.

"You know the answer to that question. I saw the man watching the house across the street. Why do you ask me that?"

"It's possible that the time I have is mistaken. But if you say you entered the house when our man says you did—then there is a double check," the Inspector explained.

"My appointment was for nine forty-five and I was late," Maud said. "I didn't get here until ten minutes to ten. And I left at five minutes past. Does it check?"

"Exactly. I am amazed at your accuracy." Eliot did seem pleased.

"I find it easy to be precise since I was cleared," Maud said. "Most human error is due to errors in the data. Uncover and clear the engram pressure—and you stop making mistakes."

"It sounds so easy," the Inspector sighed. "But in my line even the mistakes are significant."

"They are in dianetics too," Maud assured him. "An accident my mother had, while out driving with my father—the car they were in ran off the road—profoundly influenced my personality."

"Were you hurt?" the Inspector inquired politely.

"I wasn't born. But my engrams remembered and have hated and feared Claude ever since."

"Who is Claude?" the Inspector asked.

"My father. He's dead now, I believe," Maud replied.

"Don't you know?"

Maud shook her head, her braids quivering. "I thought so, but since yesterday I don't know. We'd always been told that father died in the first World War, that he was reported missing and his body wasn't recovered. But after the note I received from grandmama yesterday, I'm not so sure. It was so strange."

Eliot glanced at me and after I had shaken my head slightly, he looked back at Maud. "Do you have this note?"

"It's somewhere in my purse. Yes, here it is. Do you want to see it?"

The Inspector took the note and read it. Then Arthur and I read it. As before, none of the lines went uphill. It was the shortest, and the most peculiar, of all the notes grandmama was supposed to have sent the day before:

Dear Maud:

Nine forty-five tomorrow. Be prompt. Claude, Albert and Sybil are bothering me. Help!

(no signature)

"Would you say from that—" Maud began. She put her hand to her mouth and nibbled at her fingernails.

"I beg your pardon?" Eliot said.

But Maud was expecting me to answer. " Do you think—from that—" She paused again. "I mean, she wasn't killed before she finished the note, was she?"

"When did you receive the letter?"

"Yesterday afternoon," Maud replied. "With a key."

"Grandmama did not die until today. Mother saw her and talked to her today," I said.

"I thought she was dozing," Maud said. "She must've been dead."

There was an electric quiet.

We were all of us, except Maud, thinking the same thing. If Maud had not thought that grandmama was dead, but only dozing, then she must not have found the body in the hall. If she had found the body lying on the floor of the hall, it would have been unreasonable to suppose that the old lady had happened to take a nap in such a place.

Lizbeth had talked to Ella. Maud, the next to arrive, had found her dozing. We had not talked as yet to Oliver Derwent—Maud's husband—who had entered the mansion after his wife had left. But Jasper, who had followed Oliver, had said he had found grandmama's body on the floor. Did that mean that someone probably the murderer—if there had been a murderer, which I still hoped was not the case—had moved the body into the hall between five minutes after ten and ten twenty-nine?

"Where did you find your grandmother?" Eliot asked.

"She was sitting in her chair in the back drawing room. When I came in, I wasn't surprised that she didn't look up because I knew she was blind. I stood in front of her chair, making small sounds to indicate my presence; but she did not respond. I didn't know whether to wake her or not, but she looked so peaceful sleeping there that I didn't want to disturb her. At last I tip-toed out."

"Is there anything else you want to tell me, Mrs. Derwent?" Eliot asked.

Maud's eyes widened and she audibly drew in her breath. "How did you know? There was something wrong about that room. While I stood there, I tried to decide what it was. I knew it was uncomfortably close and stuffy, but then the blinds were drawn and Ella was old, with poor circulation. There was a tea cup beside her chair as if she had been sipping

tea when she dozed off. I touched it and found it was still warm."

Eliot stiffened and his eyelids fell down over his eyes as she said this—I saw him reach out for the notebook and flip it open, but then he did not write in it.

Maud had not noticed the effect of her words. "But none of those things explained the strange feeling I had when I was in that room. I have trained myself to use all my senses—even my sense of recall, you know. After you have studied dianetics you will be able to do what I can too. I can go back and re-live any part of my experience, even things that happened to me before I was born. And I did, as I stood there in that room. I heard my father's voice saying to my mother—'If you won't give me children, someone else will. If I am unfaithful, it will be your fault.' And I felt very badly because I knew I was about to be born and what my father was saying hurt my mother, made her cry."

Eliot passed his hand over his face, whether to hide a smile or not I could not tell. Arthur was smiling broadly, but Maud had not looked at him. I kept my own face straight. I knew that my sister believed what she said, and that many others believed with her that the new psychology of dianetics enabled a patient to remember occurrences before his birth. I did not doubt my sister's sincerity, but the experience she was reporting must have occurred in her imagination.

"What concerns me more, Mrs. Derwent," Eliot said, "is whether you know that you were the last to see your grandmother alive?"

She shook her head. "I didn't know that."

"Did you kill her?"

"I loved my grandmother. I would have done nothing to harm her."

"Did you kill her?"

"No, I did not."

"Do you know an Albert D'Yvetot?"

"I believe he is my half-brother."

I could not hide my own surprise. I had thought I had known most of what there was to be known about my family, but as each of my relatives had talked with the Inspector this afternoon I had learned something I had not known before.

But that Maud—and I—should have a half-brother was incredible.

"Do you know Albert D'Yvetot? I mean by that—you have seen him in the flesh?" the Inspector asked.

Maud shook her head. "I didn't even know of his existence until I was cleared. While I was re-living my second year I remembered a terrible time. My mother had just received a letter from France, from my father who was a flier with the Lafayette Escadrille. After she had read it, she brought it in to my grandmother who was sitting in the back drawing room. I tagged along, holding on to my mother's skirts, knowing that mother was crying and feeling badly about it. My grandmother read the note and she became furious. She said dreadful things, some of which, childlike, I thought applied to me."

"What did she say?" the Inspector asked.

"She said it was just like Claude to spawn an—an illegitimate child. She said she hoped the little devil died. She shook her fist and said that it was evil of him to give the child the family name. I thought she was talking of me."

"She did not say 'illegitimate child,' did she? She used a worse word?" Eliot asked.

Maud nodded her head. "Even now I can't repeat what she said. I thought I was the child, that she was talking about my being given the name of Longstreet. The child, of course, was Albert—born of a French woman whose name none of us ever knew—and capriciously given the name of D'Yvetot by my father. That was why grandmama was so enraged."

"What happened to this child?" the Inspector asked.

"I don't know. The only thing I know about him is what I've told you—and the reference to his name in grandmama's note of yesterday. Do you think he could be here?"

"You made no effort to seek him out in all these years?" Stephen Eliot asked.

"Inspector, I don't think you understand," Maud replied, her eyes gravely upon his face. "I didn't remember anything about the letter or what my grandmother said about Albert until I was cleared. It had been in my mind all the time, but buried. And even when I first remembered it I thought the child was me—that grandmama was saying I didn't belong in the family."

If I could have believed my sister, Maud, I should have pitied her. Her large, serious eyes had slowly filled with tears—her face was luminous and for once lovely. "And no one else knew of Albert's existence, except yourself, your mother and your grandmother?" Eliot asked.

"So far as I know, that is right," Maud said. "Claude, my father, died—he was reported missing after his airplane was seen to be shot down—and he never returned. I don't think any of us heard of the child again, certainly his name was never mentioned."

"A loose end," the Inspector muttered. "A damnable loose end."

He reached into his pocket and fumbled for something. While he groped, he asked, "Maud—who do you think killed your grandmother?"

Her answer was prompt. "Albert D'Yvetot."

"Why do you say that?"

"He would hate her—he would hate all of us. He would feel his mother had been badly treated by my father and the family. And her note to me said that he had been bothering her," Maud spoke clearly and with conviction.

"The note also said that Sybil had been bothering the old lady. Do you accept that part too? If so, do you believe in poltergeists?" Eliot's tone was incredulous.

"I've thought about that too," Maud replied. "I think grandmama was trying to say that Albert was endangering her life by some means that included Sybil or the pretense of Sybil. I think she didn't have much time when she wrote that note and had to say a great deal in a very few words."

I remembered something I had said earlier that day. Or had I thought it? I could not remember. But it had occurred to me that whoever had arranged the body so that it lay in the circle of waltzing footprints was someone who knew the family legend of Sybil and her eternal dance. If there were an Albert D'Yvetot—and despite Maud and the repeated references to him in my grandmama's correspondence, I was not convinced—and had he decided to kill my grandmother for purposes of revenge, he might have chosen to make it appear that Sybil had been present. Sybil bore his name and Sybil had suffered a similar injustice. Sybil would be revenged at last, as well as himself and the name D'Yvetot. It

made a kind of lunatic sense, but I did not believe a word of it.

Eliot had found the object he had been searching for in his pocket. He held it up so that it glittered in plain view of Arthur and myself, then leaned over and dropped it into Maud's open hand. It was the gold key to Edward Presscott's Murray Hill apartment.

Maud paled, but her hand clenched about the key. "Jasper gave you this, didn't he? What did he say about Edward and myself?"

Inspector Eliot was evasive. "Wouldn't you rather tell me yourself?"

"He probably said Edward and I were having an affair. Well, it's true—I love him!" Maud was sternly defensive.

"Are you sure that isn't what Ella Longstreet wanted to talk with you about today—the affair you're having with your mother's husband? Isn't that why you didn't wake Ella up?—because you didn't want to have to confess to her?—because you were afraid she would cut you off without a cent in disapproval of your behavior?—didn't you slip poison into her tea to keep her from waking up?—to make sure you would have money of your own and could afford to keep Edward in the style to which your mother had accustomed him?—isn't it so that you murdered Ella Longstreet?"

Maud stood slowly, proudly. "No," she said, "it isn't so. Albert D'Yvetot killed my grandmother."

THIRTEEN

"SHE WAS MURDERED, wasn't she?"

Oliver Derwent asked the question with the over-loud bluntness of a timid man who has steeled himself to be daring. He sat on the same kitchen chair that his wife had recently occupied, his legs crossed and his foot swinging nervously from the ankle. His face was small and compact and his eyes a liquid blue behind severe horn-rimmed glasses. I saw something I had not noticed before: his hands were larger than I should have expected from the rest of his small body, the fingers thick and stubby, the palms horny with callouses. I glanced at his wrists and saw that they were covered with a

thick growth of blond hair and ropy with tendons and muscles. Despite this evidence of his wiriness, which I had not previously suspected, Oliver Derwent was a retiring man who allowed his wife to dominate him.

"We can't say definitely as yet, Mr. Derwent," the Inspector replied with an off-hand friendliness he had not used before, "but it begins to look that way."

"Who do you think did it?" Oliver asked. Again there was tension in his voice—and urgency.

"That's one of the things we hoped you would be able to tell us, Mr. Derwent," Stephen Eliot said cordially.

Oliver's teeth bit down on the stem of his pipe. He had thrust his hands into the patch pockets of his garish tweed sports jacket—men used to look so much better in Norfolk jackets or blazers—and I was certain his fists were clenched underneath the cloth. "I wouldn't know," he said. "Why should I know?"

"When did you arrive at the house this morning?" Eliot asked.

"I was supposed to come at quarter past ten, but I was early. I sat on a park bench until it was nearly time and then I unlocked the gate and came in. It was about twelve minutes after ten."

"Isn't it a fact that you waited until your wife left before you entered the house yourself?"

"Yes."

"You knew that Mrs. Derwent was visiting the mansion just ahead of you?"

"Yes. I saw her letter. It was a worrisome letter."

"Did you receive a letter?"

For an answer, Oliver took his hand out of his pocket. A page of the familiar notepaper was clenched in his fist. He handed it to Eliot and Arthur and I glanced at it when the Inspector was done. The handwriting was the same as before:

Dear Oliver,

Would you be kind enough to call at a quarter past ten tomorrow?

ELLA MAYBELLE LONGSTREET

"No *affectionately* this time," Arthur said. "No trimmings of any kind."

"She knew I would come," Oliver said, taking a pride in his assertion that was obscure to me.

"Did you have a talk with her when you arrived?" Eliot asked.

Oliver hesitated long enough before responding to make me suspect that he was not giving an honest answer. "She was asleep in her chair. I didn't disturb her. I thought that, if she really wanted to talk to me, I could come again another time. I didn't realize she was dying."

"You don't think she was dead when you saw her?"

"I saw her breathing." Once more he had hesitated before speaking, as if he wanted to be sure to tell the proper lie.

"And the floor of the hall, Mr. Derwent?"

"The floor of the hall? What do you mean?"

"Was it clean or dusty at the time?"

"I didn't notice. I was preoccupied."

"What was on your mind?"

"My work. I was thinking out a problem that has been puzzling me for weeks. The solutions come to you at the oddest times. I had the idea that made all the difference as I stood there looking at Maud's grandmother and her open mouth, listening to her snore. I thought that a snore was a funny sound and tried to recall what caused it. Then I thought of the epiglottis and the way it fluttered—and I had it. If I used a flutter valve instead of a sleeve valve, and if I changed the reluctance, then the transverse oscillation could be modulated to match the input—"

"You say Ella Longstreet was *snoring?*" Eliot asked.

"It could have been the death rattle," Oliver Derwent said apologetically. "But I didn't know that then."

Eliot allowed himself to smile. "What is your work, Mr. Derwent?"

"I am an inventor."

"And what do you invent?"

"That's a secret."

"A government project, perhaps?"

"I can't say."

"But your workshop and laboratory, the materials you use and the assistants you employ—they all cost money, a great

deal of money, don't they?" Inspector Eliot said. His voice was at his silkiest. He was laying another trap.

"Last year I spent twenty-seven dollars and eighty-four cents," Oliver replied. The trap had been sprung—on Eliot's nose.

The inspector was nothing if not persistent. "But if you had a large sum of money at your disposal, you could use it to good advantage?"

"Who couldn't?" asked Oliver Derwent. Arthur laughed and the Inspector smiled at his own expense. "But if you're trying to make out that I murdered Maud's grandmother so that my wife would get her inheritance quicker, I can tell you I didn't. But if that stingy old woman had allowed us more than the bare minimum for living expenses and Maud's doctor bills, things woud have been different."

"What do you mean by 'things would have been different'?" Inspector Eliot inquired pleasantly.

"I Mean Maud might not have been bored—that's what I mean. It isn't my wife's fault that she is of a hyper-sensitive temperament. It's as if she lacked the topmost layer of skin, Inspector. The slightest impact of reality—something you or I wouldn't notice—can make my wife seriously ill. She's better now than she used to be, but she'll never be a person who can make her own way in the world. She should be cradled in luxury so that her truly marvellous talents would be used for her own and the world's good. But luxury is what I haven't been able to grant her."

He spoke bitterly and sincerely and he made me see a different Maud. My sister was intelligent and she had a good mind; she was also neurotic. But I had not noticed any talent in her except an insatiable desire to be abreast of the latest fad. I doubted that Oliver's version of his wife was as accurate as my version of my sister, but then none of us live in the same world: we only pretend to each other that we do.

"What was your opinion of Ella Longstreet?" Stephen Eliot inquired after a long silence.

"I think she was like many a wealthy old lady. She had been brought up to believe her role in life was to serve others —and to uphold the family tradition. These morals underwent a sea-change as she grew older. She came to believe that to

uphold the family tradition was to serve others. She died a miser and a snob, as well as a recluse."

"You didn't know her!" I cried. "You couldn't really have known grandmama and say things like that!" I had jumped to my feet and I could feel my whole body trembling. It was as if he had said those terrible things about me, not about someone dear to me.

Oliver stood up and took off his glasses. He swung them nervously from his fingers. His eyes looked weak and bulbous without the protective lenses. "It's you who didn't know her, Abigail," he said. "You have an idealized conception of a selfish old woman that the world is just as well off without."

This time Inspector Eliot's trap had not sprung prematurely —and it held its captive firm. As soon as Oliver had said the words, he realized his mistake. He placed his horn-rimmed glasses back over his eyes and looked directly at the Inspector who had been gazing at him. "Not that I would ever have done the simplest thing to rid the world of Ella," he said.

"I wonder, Mr. Derwent—really, I wonder. You knew your wife was having an affair with another man. You knew if she had more money she might be more content—"

"Who told you that?" Oliver demanded in a hoarse, a broken voice. I saw him sway. "It isn't so, is it?"

Inspector Eliot realized that he had dealt the man a shock. "You did not know?" he said quietly.

"I had not heard. Who is he?"

"I don't think that it's my business to say, Mr. Derwent." The Inspector passed his hand over his chin. "I could even say—and believe you—that it is only hearsay. That would be true. But it is hearsay I haven't heard challenged." Eliot was trying to let him down easily. He knew as well as Arthur and I that the person who could have challenged the rumor—and who instead had verified it, was Maud.

"I'm sorry," Oliver said; "I should have better control over my feelings. Have you any further questions, Inspector?"

"Only one," Eliot said. "Do you know an Albert D'Yvetot?"

"I have never heard the name." He turned and walked to the door, shuffling his feet.

"I have a question, Oliver," I said. "And I must have an answer to it."

Oliver whirled about, his lips working, as if some invisible force had jerked him backward. "If—if I can answer it—" he stammered.

"When you were waiting out in the great hall with the others, and I was taking in the tea things, you came up to me. Do you remember?" I asked. I kept my voice low and well-modulated although I still felt light-headed with anger.

"Y-yes."

"Do you also remember what you said to me then?" I asked.

Oliver tried to be casual. It did not come off. He is a poor excuse for a man. "I said hello—or something like that, didn't I? I do forget."

Eliot was regarding both of us with interest. Arthur had walked over to where Eliot sprawled on the kitchen table and was puffing on his pipe.

"I do not forget, Oliver. You told me that you had a difficult interview with Ella. You said that you could hardly understand what she said and that it had been very tiring."

"Did I say that?"

"You know you did. And only just now you have told the Inspector that Ella was asleep or dying when you saw her. Which is the truth, Oliver?"

Derwent brushed his hand across his thinning blond hair. "They're both the truth. She did fall asleep, but she talked to me first. It was hard to understand what she said. She sounded drowsy or worse. I was alarmed. I didn't tell the Inspector because—" He stopped and looked around the room in dismay. Had there been a door or window open I believe he would have bolted.

"Why didn't you tell me?" the Inspector asked suddenly, his brisk manner informing me that he would do the questioning from then on.

"I didn't tell you because I wasn't sure I understood her correctly. Her words were very thick."

"What did she say—or what did you understand her to say?" Eliot asked impatiently.

Oliver's pipe hung laxly from his mouth, ashes and embers falling on his jacket and the floor. He made no effort to brush them off. "She said something about someone named, I think, Al. She kept saying 'eee!' Each time after she squealed like that, she would shape her lips into an O—but no sound would

come out. Then she would say 'kill me,' very clearly. The rest I couldn't understand at all."

"After hearing her talk in that way, you didn't call the police?" Eliot asked angrily.

"I didn't think of it. I only wanted to get out. I'd always heard Maud say she was queer—and, well, I found her behaving queerly."

The Inspector waived his hand, dismissing Oliver. The small man left as quickly as he could. Arthur watched the swinging door shut on him and then he said, "I think he's lying."

"I do too," I said. "I thought you ought to know that he had changed his story, Inspector."

"I knew it already," Eliot said to my astonishment. "You remember I asked them all to give me statements before I questioned them? Well, you may be interested in Oliver Derwent's statement." He took a page from his notebook on which an envelope was pasted, sorted the pieces of paper in the envelope until he found the one he wanted and then began to read from it.

" 'I let myself in the front door at ten-twelve. I didn't see Ella Longstreet at first and then I saw her standing in the door of one of the rooms. I followed her and she talked to me, but I couldn't understand her. After trying to understand her for some time, I left. It was then ten twenty-two.

OLIVER DERWENT.
(Signed).' "

"Why does he keep changing his story?" I asked.

"I didn't think he was that stupid," Arthur said. "But this whole mess is beyond me."

Inspector Eliot slid off the kitchen table and walked over to the sink. He turned on a spigot and let the water run, splashing the stream with his hand like a mischievous boy. I thought he would never turn the spigot off and dry his hands. And while he was playing with the water, he made us wait.

"It wasn't stupidity," Eliot said slowly, "but perhaps the man is afraid. Yes, I think he is really afraid—for his own life, I think. He had to change his story, even though he

knew I would notice the discrepancy between what he had written and what he said. What we must find out is why he had to change his story and of what he is afraid."

Eliot's ideas puzzled me. I did not follow his mind always, and I wondered if I would agree with his ultimate conclusion. I should rather not have had the police involved in what was a family affair, but now that they were involved I wanted to make certain that they went about the investigation properly.

Eliot smiled at me and once again showed his ability to interpret my unspoken thoughts. "You are bewildered by my methods, Miss Longstreet—and you too, Mr. Crump? Aah-hmn. I thought so. You would feel better if I kept everything secret and had a stenographer taking down what was said by everybody, now wouldn't you? If I made each of you come in singly—and ignored you both for hours at a time—you would hate me for it, but think I was doing a good job? Is that right? Aah-yes.

"Well, I tried all that. May work for some—doesn't do for me. Criminals are human beings. I discovered that fact quite a few years back and most of my associates doubt it yet. Selling soap, making love to a woman or discovering the identity of a murderer—it's all the same. You treat them nice and then you treat them rough. And just about the time they think you're rough, why, you treat them nice again. And when they're thinking isn't he a lovable old dear, why, that's the time to rough them up. And let everybody watch and listen—within reason, within reason. The more pointers they get from watching the others squirm, the fancier mistakes they make when their turn comes. It all makes for a good show."

The Deputy Chief Inspector stopped and eyed us both. I had thought he was joking when he began, but now that I caught his eyes I could not doubt his sincerity. "That's another thing," he said—"aah-hmn, a very fine point, indeed! Always put on a good show to keep yourself amused. The cardinal rule of intuitive detection—Point Number One By An Old Centre Street Hand. More murderers have tripped away on the follolaroo from the Inspector getting bored and ho-humming at a clue than you would care to know. Secrecy is dull. Let everybody in on the act. Pay attention to all that goes on. If an oriole is singing out the window, go listen to it.

I did that once and I found out the oriole was singing because it was angry. All its little orioles had been tumbled out of the nest. So I climbed the tree and found the murder weapon that my associates and the flubdubs from the D.A.'s office had been looking for all week. See what I mean?

"Know everything that goes on. Don't be afraid to know too much—or that your suspects will know too much. The more you know, the sooner you'll find out. And always remember, even a murderer was loved by his mother. That's my method."

"Both Arthur and I are glad, I'm sure, to know that you have a method," I said.

Eliot bowed to me. "You will find that I am usually successful," he said.

"What I'd like to know," Arthur broke in, "is what you make of one part of what Derwent had to say—the bit about Ella Longstreet's attempts at speech. Have you any idea what she was trying to say?"

"I had the distinct impression," I told Arthur, "that Oliver was lying. I do not know whether he saw grandmama or not, whether she was dead or not if he did see her—and I doubt that she made any of the inarticulate sounds that Oliver described. It was not like my grandmama to be incoherent."

Eliot smiled expansively at me. "By now I've a definite and high regard for the decorum of your grandmama, Miss Longstreet—but I must confess to the belief that even Ella, faced with the disintegration and chaos of death, might fail to make herself understood."

He turned to Arthur and continued: "At the same time, Mr. Crump, I must also admit that Miss Longstreet has a point about Oliver Derwent's veracity. I might also add that some, if not all of the others we've talked with since tea have compromised the truth.

"But that doesn't mean that it is sensible to ignore Oliver's report on Ella's incoherent attempts at speech, even if it isn't true. As I said before, lies can be as significant as facts. They are, in effect, a kind of reverse fact.

"Now I take it that from the monosyllable *Al,* the extended vowed sound *eeee* and the words *kill me*—which was all the sense Oliver Derwent claimed to have made from Ella's last words— she must've been trying to say, 'Albert D'Yvetot

killed me.' What she did say was, 'Al . . . eeee . . . kill me." That is close enough to the other to leave little room for another interpretation."

"She might have been mistaking Oliver for Albert D'Yvetot and, recognizing the extremity of her illness, asking him to kill her," Arthur said.

Eliot glared at him. " 'The extremity of her illness,' Mr. Crump? How do you know she had been ill?"

Arthur recovered himself quickly, but along with the Inspector I wondered if his last remark had not indicated a greater knowledge of Ella Longstreet and the circumstances surrounding her death than he had let us know. "She was subject to heart attacks, wasn't she? I think I remember Miss Longstreet saying that the parlormaid had told her that Ella had suffered several in recent months. Since we don't as yet know the results of the post mortem analysis, we can't be sure of the cause of death. And if we accept the truth of Oliver Derwent's report—which I don't for a minute, Inspector, please remember that—then the incoherency and drowsiness that he mentioned would seem to me to point to another heart attack."

"Sound reasoning," the Inspector said. He reached into his pocket for the pigskin case and snapped it open. He looked long at the last cigar in the case and then decided to extract it. As he rolled it between his fingers, it seemed to me that his touch was gentler even than before.

"Yes—aah, yes—that's good reasoning, *if we accept Oliver Derwent's report.* Eliot paused and looked at me. "But what if we don't?" he demanded rhetorically of me. "Then the significance of Derwent's lie becomes the problem of why he chose to lie exactly as he did, instead of in one of an infinite number of different ways.

"Actually, of course, Derwent didn't have quite an infinite choice of lies. The liar is always under obligation to make his fiction believable—which means it must be constructed of the materials that those that listen to the liar's words would expect to be used. If Oliver had said that when Ella spoke to him she recited a canto by Ezra Pound, none of us would have believed him. Similarly, if he had said they had talked about the Dodgers' pennant chances, his tale would have been incredible. But he sensed from the questions

he had been asked and the other statements he had overheard that we thought Ella had been murdered and that a stranger by the name of Albert D'Yvetot was a prime suspect. This was the burden of his semi-conscious thoughts as he began to improvise his lie.

"I believe Oliver must've thought—and remember that I am supposing he lied, which isn't proven, just as a supposition that he told the truth would have yet to be corrobated—that the safest lie to tell, now that he had to say what Ella's attempts at conversation had been, was that she had been incoherent and he hadn't understood her. But even incoherency, if it is to be believed, must be described. So Oliver described her imagined incoherence, thinking he was choosing syllables at random, but actually giving us valuable clues to his own mental preoccupations. And if we take those sounds to represent what Oliver was thinking, instead of what Ella was trying to say—we get startlingly different results."

"I don't see what you mean," Arthur said. He knocked his pipe out onto the floor making a frightful clatter and a disgusting mess.

"Al . . . eeee . . . kill me—if you think of them as clues to Oliver's obsessive thoughts—mean what to you?" the Inspector asked.

Arthur shook his head obdurately, but I thought I understood what Eliot was saying. He was really a clever man. "Are you trying to get us to realize that what Oliver is frightened of is that the murderer may kill him next?"

"Exactly," said the Inspector. "*Al* in Olivers's mind stands for the murderer. It may not be the murderer's actual name, but because of the stress placed on the name of Albert D'Yvetot during the interview the first syllable of the latter name displaces the name of the murderer. Then of course it could be the murderer's name—it's a logical alternative—and we don't know the identity of Albert D'Yvetot.

"*Eeee* suggests many meanings when we think of Oliver. For one it imitates a cry of terror and thus reflects the fright he feels. The next most likely meaning I think is that it stands for the personal pronoun. Thus we know what Oliver was thinking as he lied to us: 'Al . . . he'll . . . kill me.' "

"But why?" asked Arthur.

The Inspector shrugged. "We don't know that yet, but I can tell you that most often when a criminal commits a second murder it is to make someone who knows he is guilty of the first crime keep quiet—permanently."

"At least, if your reasoning is correct, Oliver is eliminated from the suspects," I said.

"Only if he were lying about your grandmother's incoherence. But, Miss Longstreet—if he were telling the truth?"

I sighed. It was difficult to pin the Inspector down.

Edward Presscott was the last member of the family that Inspector Eliot talked with that evening. He is about the most presentable man any Longstreet woman has married in the past twenty years. Edward is tall, well-built and inclined to be athletic. His face, although not really handsome, has the evenness of features that in these decadent times passes for male comeliness. Since he spends a good amount of time out of doors his face is deeply tanned and I hear that is considered attractive today too, even in women.

He walked into the kitchen as he might have entered a store or an office. He smiled at me, nodded at Arthur, although they had met just that afternoon, and extended his hand to the Inspector. "I've heard a lot about you, Inspector Eliot," he said warmly, as he pumped the man's arm; "I understand that in your own field you're considered a genius."

The Inspector was unembarrassed by this extravagant praise. After watching him all afternoon I knew that he was an egoist and I took a certain ironic satisfaction in seeing him bloom before Edward's flattery. "I have had a little luck," he said with the least possible modesty.

"I want to help you any way I can," Edward reassured him.

"I've only a few questions—a very few questions. Mere routine," the Inspector said. As he spoke I was aware that, though the vain side of him basked in Edward's praise, the investigator half of him continued to tick as stolidly as any clock. Edward would not know what was happening until it had happened. Knowing this gave me satisfaction too; I dislike Edward as much as I do Jasper.

"For instance," the Inspector was saying, "can you tell me when you entered the house this morning—and when you left? I had it all written down, but I'm afraid I've misplaced it."

"I was due at quarter to eleven," Edward said. "But traffic was heavy along the Avenue and I was slightly late. I think I arrived a couple of minutes after the time I was supposed to arrive—and I left before eleven o'clock."

"You can't be more exact than that?" the Inspector asked.

"I'm afraid not, but it's good enough for your purposes—isn't it? Say I arrived at thirteen minutes before the hour and left at seven to eleven. I'll stand on that."

As I remembered the times, and one of my gifts is a good memory, Edward was precisely right. He was only jollying the Inspector. Well, he would regret it.

"You say you were supposed to be here by quarter to eleven. Does that mean you were invited by Ella Longstreet?" Eliot inquired.

"I got a note from her as the others did. Unfortunately I can't show it to you. I destroyed it after having read it—that's an old habit of mine. I've had one or two letters that I would have preferred not to have gotten around do just that in my time; it can be damnably inconvenient."

I thought it was interesting that a blackmailer should take the precautions, that had his victims followed, would have protected them against him. The threat that Edward had made to me a few hours earlier was still fresh in my mind. He had gone about it so clumsily.

"Can't you remember what it said?" Eliot asked.

Presscott put his hand to his head and closed his eyes. "She wrote me that after giving the matter some consideration she had decided to come around to my point of view. And she set the time for our interview."

"And can you tell me what matter she referred to?"

Presscott opened his eyes, only to narrow them slightly. I thought he would refuse to answer that question—he had written Ella several pressing letters begging for funds in recent weeks which I had forwarded but to which I had received no response. But I was wrong. "I have some gambling debts. Several thousands of dollars worth, in fact. I'll have to pay them soon or I'll be in trouble. I'd asked Ella for an advance on Lizbeth's next income check. Until I received her note yesterday there had been no response."

"And when you saw the lady today, did she give you the money?" the Inspector asked.

"When I saw the lady today, she was dead. She was lying on the floor in the great hall. I didn't take her pulse or even come near her. I was so surprised—and grieved—that I stood there for I don't know how long and then I left."

"Did you call the police?"

"No."

"Why didn't you?"

"I know the trouble you can get into by calling the police. And don't get the idea that I killed her either. I had nothing to do with it."

"You could have obtained the money for your gambling debts by killing her, couldn't you? Your wife will stand to inherit a good deal—isn't that the way you understand it?" The Inspector's tone was pleasant. He was asking questions out of curiosity, or so it seemed.

"Look, Inspector Eliot, I'm a fool—but not that big a one. I had a few turns of the wheel and I owe a gangster a few grand. I've got to find some money some way. But committing murder isn't the way to get yourself out of trouble. I'd rather welch and fly to Mexico than chance that."

"Some of the boys have Mexican connections," the Inspector said. "Alaska is safer."

"You don't really think I killed her?" Edward had realized, as I knew he would eventually, that Eliot had let him talk himself into difficulties.

"You had the motive and the opportunity," the Inspector said.

"But so did practically everyone else. Why pick on me?"

The Inspector was silent. Then, after Edward had adjusted his foulard for the second or third time, Eliot asked—"Do you know an Albert D'Yvetot?"

"I've heard about Sybil," Edward said smoothly. "Is Albert any relation?" His tone was jocular as if he were making a little joke.

"The name was mentioned in some of the other notes various family members received from Ella Longstreet," the Inspector said, "but no one seems to have met the chap."

"Certainly I haven't," Edward replied.

"And I suppose the floor of the great hall was dusty when you discovered the body?"

"No, it was clean. At least no unusual amount of dust.

Should it have been covered with dust?" Edward was speaking quickly and irritably, his composure gone.

The Inspector let one of his eyebrows ascend above the level of the other—he did not appear to have raised it, but the thing had managed its maneuver of its own accord. He said nothing.

"You fellows do have to make a mystery of things, don't you?" Edward said, probably because the sound of his own voice reassured him. "It's part of the rules of the game, I suppose?"

Eliot smiled charmingly. "You flatter me, Mr. Presscott, and I like it. Actually I hadn't a thought in my head—merely day-dreaming. Oh, there was something there. I'd noticed your build, you know. A good one—oh, very good, indeed. Go to the gymnasium much?"

"I belong to the Athletic Club."

"Calisthenics and all that? The horses? Parallel bars? Giant swings?"

Edward gave a start, although it seemed to me that the Inspector was just rattling on. Edward was nervous as a cat about something. But after a few more minutes of senseless chatter, the Inspector dismissed him. Then he turned to Arthur Crump.

"Will you see Miss Longstreet to her home, Mr. Crump? I don't want her to go unescorted." Arthur nodded his head and smiled at me when he saw that I had bridled.

"And I'll see you in the morning, dear," the Inspector said, "and bring you the results of the post mortem analysis."

As Arthur said later, Eliot had appeared to be in a hurry to get us to leave. It might have been that he had other matters, possibly not connected with my grandmother's death, to which he had to attend. But we both felt that if he had business to attend to it had to do with grandmama—that, despite his method, he did not always work in the open.

"He reminds me of a magician with his sleeves rolled who puts the bunny in the hat with one hand while he makes you look at the other hand that has nothing to hide," Arthur remarked between two mouthfuls of sole.

"And tomorrow he will pull the bunny from the hat," I said.

"That's it," said Arthur. He took me home that night, but before that he took me to dinner. At the Chambord. And it was there that I told him about Claude and the dangerous task in which he might help me that night.

FOURTEEN

NO WOMAN LIKES to see the look that was in Arthur's eyes when I came into my sitting room dressed in my bloomers and my macintosh. I cannot describe the way he looked at me except to say that I saw in his expression a mixture of horror and revulsion. His voice, when he spoke, was like a croak. "No, Abigail, no! You can't go like that!"

"I told you that our expedition would require a certain amount of physical exertion," I replied. "And I thought it only proper to dress sensibly for it."

"But—but those things!" Arthur said, pointing at my bloomers. "You can't wear those."

"Why not. Are they not decent and practicable?" It occurred to me that he might have expected me to wear slacks or those blue cotton garments that young girls affect these days. I mention it only to point out the debased standards of our culture.

He shook his head dejectedly. "If we take your car," he said, "and go by the side streets, I suppose it's all right."

At dinner I had explained to Arthur that Claude, my father, had not died in France. He had been missing until the end of the war when the Army had located him in a German prison. Claude was not a prisoner of war, which accounted for the fact that the Red Cross had not been able to locate him. He had been serving a short term as a common criminal convicted of a theft.

Shortly after he was returned to France his behaviour caused him to be hospitalized. There appeared to be nothing wrong with him physically and his actions were entirely rational, except that they were often vicious and even homicidal. The incident that caused him to be hospitalized was an altercation he had had with a taxi driver who had tried to overcharge him. He had picked the man up and thrown him through the windshield of his Renault.

A more thorough physical examination revealed that my father had recovered from a bullet wound in his right temple. Recovered is a misnomer: the machine-gun bullet was still lodged in his frontal lobe. Several surgeons, including a brain specialist, were called in and it was decided that the chances for recovery from a delicate operation—that would extract the bullet and relieve the pressure on the medulla—were as good as they ever are in these affairs.

My father was consulted and told that if the operation were not performed his temperament would remain unstable. He would be subject to unreasonable fits of rage and be the victim of ungovernable impulses for the rest of his life, if the Army alienists chose to give him a discharge. If he were not given a discharge, he would be confined in a mental institution.

On hearing the difficult alternatives, Claude had chosen to submit to the operation. He had survived it and had made a long recovery as is usual in such cases. His behavior had seemed much improved, except for one unfortunate circumstance. He had lost his powers of speech. The removal of the bullet, while relieving pressure, had interfered with the center of the speech faculties. Claude could make inarticulate sounds that approached words, but it was unlikely that he would ever talk normally again.

In the meantime my mother and my grandmother had thought my father dead. Even after he had been found the Army, at my father's request, had not informed the family; consequently, they knew nothing of the operation or his limited recovery. Claude had money in his own name—which was Bryant—and he had chosen to live on quietly in France rather than to return to America and his family.

My mother and Claude had not had a good life. Although I doubted that my sister remembered the quarrel between my father and my mother that she had reported to Inspector Eliot, such an argument would not have been inconceivable. Even as a child I had heard rumors of my father's infidelity to my mother in the years before the war when Maud was little. Jasper and I had been born, less than a year apart, after my father finally returned from France.

Claude came back in 1920. Maud was visiting some friends on the Coast at the time he came home and did not know

of his return. He appeared, unannounced, in the back drawing room one summer's evening and handed my grandmama a neatly handwritten note that demanded to know, "Where's my wife?"

Lizbeth, who had long since given up her husband as lost, was having dinner with a young man. When they returned, Claude started a fight. He was very strong and he picked up my mother's escort and carried him bodily to the street where he threw him into the gutter. My mother was hysterical. It was a terrible night.

My grandmama prevented a scandal, but it was a near thing. Lizbeth and Claude went off to Canada, at Claude's insistence and against my grandmama's better judgment. Lizbeth returned alone in a few days, bruised and nearly out of her mind, insisting that her husband was insane. Claude was missing again and a person less foresighted than my grandmama might have declared good riddance and forgotten about it. Instead, Ella knew that Claude would return again —"as it was his right, since this was his home"—and grandmama prepared a room for him. The room to this day is on the top floor of the Longstreet mansion, its walls two feet thick and padded, its door of steel, with a portcullis and a strong lock to keep Claude in and the others out.

When Claude returned my grandmother did a brave, even a foolhardly, thing. She sat with him and reasoned with him about his condition. He told her that the neurosurgeons had told him that though he would never recover his speech entirely it was unlikely that he would again be given to the ungovernable and destructive impulses that had been so ruinous. He wrote out what he wanted to say in a quick, legible handwriting on small slips of paper and listened carefully to my grandmother's answers.

"Has it occurred to you by now that the neurosurgeons may have been mistaken in their judgment about the extent of your recovery?" Ella had asked him.

"For some time I'd thought they were right," came back the reply. "I'd even found myself a girl and had a child, a fine boy, by her. Then one night I was having an *aperitif* in a café when I blacked out. The next I knew the place was a shambles and I was being arrested by the *gendarmes*. It happened a few more times. The last time when I came to

my senses I was on a boat for America. I decided to come home."

"You aren't responsible for your actions," my grandmother had said.

"The place for me is an asylum," Claude had written.

My grandmother had taken him by the hand then and had led him to the top floor where the recently-equipped room had been prepared. It was a pleasant room, lined with books, that had a good bed, several easy chairs, a bathroom, two closets—one stocked with clothes and one with wines. "You will be comfortable here and in the bosom of your family. You may have whatever you want. Should you desire medical attentance, you may have that. And, should you ever fully recover, you have only to tell me to gain your freedom."

Claude at that time was rational except when his irresistible and capricious hatred seized him. He understood that if he went his own way he would be institutionalized by the state in a matter of time. If he accepted this benign and limited imprisonment he would retain some dignity and a great deal of luxury. After sleeping on it, he agreed to Ella's plan.

To some it may appear that my grandmother undertook a grave responsibility in thus caring for a dangerously sick man who was related only by marriage. I know that Ella sensed the public shame that Claude would have brought to the family name through brawling or worse violence, eventually, had she not kept him at home.

Only Lizbeth was informed of his presence in the room. The secrecy was Claude's own idea. Little Maud, as I have said, had been away during his former visit and he preferred that she retain her baby memories of her father in his prime. He had forgotten the name of the woman in France and even the name of his illegitimate child. Although my grandmother tried, through the Red Cross and other agencies, to locate these people, the information she had to go on was meager and her efforts unavailing.

Lizbeth visited Claude frequently during the first year or two of his incarceration and they had some sort of a life together. His violent intervals grew more extended eventually, but not before Jasper had been born in 1922 and I nearly a year later. By the time my brother and I were able to run

about the house and to prattle, the entire top floor had been shut off—to save expenses was the explanation usually given. I know that I had not heard the true account of my father's tragedy until my fifteenth year—indeed, grandmama told me about Claude the same day she announced her retirement from the world with me her sole contact.

Arthur had listened intently while I had told him this long and sordid story over our coffee after dinner. Most of the time I had been talking I had lost myself in my own feelings but I had looked at him occasionally and had seen that my father's fate filled him with great emotion. Arthur's face was drained of blood and his eyes were red-rimmed although no tears had come. His mouth was a quivering, bluish line. His strong fingers gripped a table-knife as if it were a sword.

"Was Claude, your father, the reason why Ella sequestered herself?" he asked.

"I think he was, but I couldn't get grandmama to say. She had picked quarrels with each member of the family over the years and banished them from the house. I have always thought she feared that they would learn too much about Claude's condition. I know that Jasper suspected the truth and tried to use it to his own advantage—I am fairly sure that is why he was forced to leave," I said.

"But Lizbeth, your mother, knew—what was the point in her leaving?" Arthur asked.

"Lizbeth knew Claude was in the house, but I don't think she saw him again after—after he grew worse. I think that was her own choice. I know my mother told us that my father was dead; perhaps she believed it to be so. I don't know. Then, you must remember, she began to go about with other men and finally married Edward a few years back—he was only twenty-eight when she married him, incidentally, and a very romantic figure. He had been something most hush-hush in Army Intelligence." I had taken a sip of my coffee and used the opportunity to glance at Arthur unobserved. He was such a pleasant young man.

"There's one part of it I don't understand," Arthur had said slowly; "how could psychiatrists and neurosurgeons make such a grave mistake? And if Claude really were psychotic the night he came back to the house, why did he let your grandmother lock him up? Oh yes, and why should she prefer

to have a lunatic on the premises rather than in an asylum?"

"Let me answer your questions backwards," I had told him. "Grandmama would do anything to avoid scandal. Can you imagine how the sensational papers would have featured the story if Claude had been committed?—especially if he had gone away that night and had been caught later after having done something terrible? The family would not have been able to hold up its head!"

Arthur had chosen to shake his own. "Even so it seems risky to me. He might have done violence to her." Here Arthur had paused as the full meaning of his own thought had struck him. "Say, didn't you tell me that your grandmama was blinded suddenly—and that she gave you little explanation, no real explanation at all, when you asked her what had happened? And you also said that her eyeballs were pitted and scarred—?"

I could only nod my head.

"He did, finally, do violence to her then? And you don't know what happened?"

Again I had nodded my head.

"And when Ella knew Claude had become too dangerous for you to be around, she sent you away. She locked herself up in the house, a blind old woman alone, except for a few servants, with a crazed man who could not talk—"

I looked at him, but I could not speak.

"Then, in the last months and weeks, the servants began to leave. When Mabel came and told you what she did, why didn't you investigate?"

Arthur had pointed out my great mistake—the one I wished I had never made. "I can only tell you what I said to the Inspector. I didn't believe her. I thought if grandmama needed me, she would write. I respected her privacy." It was hard to talk. All the emotion I had held back all day was near the surface. I controlled myself from moment to moment, not wanting to make a scene.

"*Mon dieu!*" Arthur said. "And he's still loose in that house?"

I had nodded my head.

"Tell me, Abigail, the story about Sybil—your grandmama made that up to cover the times Claude was loose in the

house?" Arthur had lowered his voice, perhaps without knowing it, to a hoarse and expectant whisper.

"She let Claude come down whenever there was a family reunion. She felt she owed it to him. He played the ghost. He had a little music box which she had bought him. He would dance . . . in the great hall . . ."

"What a ghastly idea! She must've been courting a catastrophe at every family party!"

"That was mostly only in the beginning, when Claude was mostly rational. That was another question you asked, which I haven't answered yet. I started backwards, you remember? The night grandmama talked to Claude and persuaded him to live in the locked room, he must have been as lucid as you or I.

"As I understand it, the scalpel that removed the bullet also severed certain connections in the frontal lobes. It was an accidental lobotomy. Sometimes this is done today to correct criminal tendencies, although it usually means a very long recovery and a complex personality change. The doctors can't always tell, even today, how the operation will turn out.

"But in Claude's case, at a time when they knew even less about the brain than they do now, the cutting of the nerve connections was accidental. Claude did not begin to show his lack of responsibility until a year or so later, after they thought he had recovered. And it was more difficult to tell in him because of his speech disorder. But at no time, in those early years, was he insane in the sense that he did not know who he was, that he heard voices or imagined he was persecuted or anything like that.

"As grandmama explained it to me, Claude—possibly even now—is as sane as you or I. The difference is, when I get mad at Jasper or somebody else who exasperates me, I may think that I'd like to wring his neck. I don't do it because a part of my brain, the part the doctors say belongs in my frontal lobes, objects to my impulse and warns me of what might happen to me if I did wring Jasper's neck, of how immoral my grandmother would think me, of how I should disgrace the family and other considerations of that sort."

"I'd say that your conscience intervened," Arthur said.

"That would be one way of putting it. Well, the doctor's knife slipped and cut off Claude's conscience. When the

nerve connections in the frontal lobe were severed, Claude no longer had anything to stop him from wringing someone's neck if he wanted to—and sometimes he tried to do it. The doctors did not realize this and they thought he had recovered. They would have had to observe him over a very long period to have seen one of his unexpected bursts of violence. And then the disorder didn't develop at once—it took a year or so."

Arthur asked the waiter to bring us more coffee and brandy. "You think Claude may be worse these days?"

"I don't know, Arthur. I should think the sanest of men who had been shut up in a single room for thirty years, even if by his own agreement, would have gone insane. Isn't that one of the reasons for exercise and workshops and the parole system in modern prisons? I don't know enough about the brain to know if Claude's complaint might become progressively worse."

"You think Claude made those footprints around the body?" Arthur asked.

"It was my first thought. That's why I removed them. Now I don't know."

"You were shielding Claude?" Arthur asked.

"No, not really. I was shielding the family. I could see the reporters learning about that circle of footprints—the legend of the poltergeist—it would be a sensation on every front page of the country."

"I think you exaggerate," Arthur had said. "There might have been some publicity, I grant you that. But it would've been over in a few days and everyone would have forgotten about it."

He did not understand and I saw little use in arguing with him. The family was sacred to me.

"Do you think Claude killed her?" he asked.

"It was my first thought. I don't think so any longer," I said. "If she was killed, and we're not yet certain of that, it was by a subtle means. Claude wouldn't have been subtle. He would have done it brutally and in a fit of anger, perhaps over a petty frustration."

Arthur sipped at his brandy and shook his head slowly. "I don't like it. I don't like it one bit. The idea of that poor

old blind woman alone in that great house caring for a maniac; it sends chills down my spine."

"You are forgetting one thing," I said.

"What's that?"

"Claude is old now too. He must be in his sixties. No, perhaps not that old. You see, I do not even know my father's age. But he has to be in his fifties, doesn't he?"

"If he was an officer in the *Lafayette Escadrille,* I'd say yes."

We sat silently regarding each other. "What do you want me to do?" Arthur asked quietly.

"How do you know I want you to do anything?"

"You haven't been telling me all this to hear yourself talk. If it had been that, you could have told Inspector Eliot. You know you will have to tell him, don't you?"

"I hope not. I prefer to keep it in the family." I looked him directly in the eye and he did not flinch.

"What do you want me to do?" Arthur asked again.

"He has to be fed. You saw the condition of that roast. I think he must be wandering around the place. He must be persuaded to go back to his room—for the time being."

"It would be simpler to tell Inspector Eliot and let the police handle it," Arthur said.

I said an unfair thing. "You forget Claude is my father."

He made a circle with his knife on the tablecloth and then he crossed it out with a series of furious, zig-zag strokes. "All right," he said. "I'm game."

I even persuaded Arthur to let me wear my bloomers and my macintosh. I shall admit that when we went down in the elevator he stood in the farthest corner, as if he hoped the elevator boy would not know he was with me; and he lagged behind me as we walked to my car. Men are peculiar creatures. They berate women for following the fashions from year to year but if they sense a woman's clothes are out of fashion, no matter how sound the reason, they treat her as a pariah.

It took us less than fifteen minutes to get to where Arthur and I had agreed it would be a safe place to park the car; it was nearly midnight and traffic was at a minimum. We walked up Madison Avenue to the side street we wanted and

then stood in the shadows waiting for the policeman on duty guarding the great house across the street to pass by. Our plan was that we should wait until the officer had gone past several times, keeping track of the interval between his appearances. Then we would cut across the street, slip through the fence into the grounds and enter the house by the servants' entrance.

The night had grown chill and a fine mist was falling. When automobiles passed on the street, their tires snickered on the damp pavement. I am not used to such thin clothing and I found myself shivering; when I chafed my wrists with my hands I found my flesh coarse and goose-pimply.

"I've been thinking about you and your feeling for the family—and its tradition—and all that," Arthur said thoughtfully.

"You think me queer," I said. "I know you do. I've seen it in your expression too often."

"Not queer," he said. "No, queer is the wrong word. A little sad, perhaps. I'm sorry for you."

"You needn't be sorry for me," I said tartly.

"Yes, I think I should be," he insisted. "You see, it came to me suddenly this evening that you really aren't a Longstreet after all. Your last name should be Bryant, shouldn't it?"

"My name is legally Longstreet," I said harshly. "So is Jasper's and so was Maud's, before she was married. We changed our names to that of grandmama's when we came of age."

"Why did you do that?"

"Grandma requested it. Only Jasper didn't want to; but when Ella told him she would increase his allowance he became more reasonable."

"Your grandmother went to great ends to cover up all traces of your father, didn't she? This shame of hers—and of yours—I think is rather pathetic." His tone was condescending and I wanted to strike his face. I knew that I needed his help and I restrained myself.

"You are maniacally proud of the famiy and yet you really have no right to the name," he went on. "If it hadn't been for your grandmama's legal trickery, and the fact that she has imprisoned and concealed your father for so many years, the

Longstreet name would die with her. Have you thought of that?"

"If you are suggesting that my grandmama did anything reprehensible—" I began with sudden anger. But he caught my hand and held it, forcing me to look into his eyes. I saw then that he was utterly sincere and I had to hear him out.

"I am not suggesting anything of the sort, Abigail," he said quietly and earnestly. "I am only putting into words certain thoughts that you must've had yourself countless times, but on account of some quirk in your own personality you have not admitted even to yourself. You are very insecure, aren't you? You feel you must cling to your grandmother, to her name and ways—that your world and being are lost if the family tradition is lost. And deep within you, Abigail, you must be aware that is a lie—that there is more to life than that."

"If you feel you have to lecture me, go ahead," I said. "But be quick about it. The policeman has already gone past once and I've noted the time. When he goes by again—"

"I'll be quick," he said. "I don't know whether there's any truth to what I'm going to say next or not. But how do you know that your father has been imprisoned all these years justly? Have you ever seen him? Has any member of the family seen him except your mother?"

I had to admit that I had never known Claude. But mother saw him frequently those first years after he came back. If he weren't insane, would she have permitted—? I did not finish my thought. My own opinion of my mother's moral integrity is not high. She could be persuaded to accept almost any accomplished fact, if it were in her favor. And there had been many young men during those years—and she had been at the height of her beauty.

"Suppose he had been only sick, Abigail? Suppose he could have been cured? Or suppose he hadn't been sick at all? Suppose your grandmother had put him away secretly for reasons of her own? Have you any evidence to say that isn't so? Have you any letters from your father? Do you know any unprejudiced person, the family doctor you mentioned perhaps, who could attest to your father's insanity?"

"I don't think Dr. Phillips was called in," I said. "But I

know my grandmama. She would never have done anything like that. Grandmama was a lady."

Arthur shrugged his shoulders, unconvinced. "Have it your own way," he said.

We stood in silence until the policeman passed again and then we scurried across the street. I had the key to the servants' entrance but to get in that way we should have had to walk half a block in full view of any passerby. Fortunately, we were both slim enough to slip between the bars of the iron fence, which was more ornamental than protective, having been erected in an era when the streets were safe and criminals kept out of respectable areas.

Once inside the grounds, I walked to the rear of the great house and flattened myself against the wall so that I should be indistinguishable from the shadows. Arthur followed me instantly and did as I had done, holding the face of his luminous watch up to his eyes and counting off the minutes so that we should know the moment when the policeman would be rounding the farthest corner and we could make a dash for the front door of the house. It was only four minutes that we stood there, but it seemed ten times that long.

I stumbled once and fell in the mud, tearing my bloomer and skinning my leg; but we made it to the front door and into the house without being seen. Arthur pressed the button of his flashlight, illuminating with a ghostly ray the part of the great hall that lay before us. We stood still while Arthur played the flashlight around the huge room, focussing it on the reversed paintings, the sweep of the staircase and the high, flat ceiling. The crystal chandelier that hung above our heads caught his beam and smashed it into a thousand glittering jewels of pale, dusty light. It flickered and shimmered across the ceiling, showing up the faces of the cherubim, the nymphs and satyrs that cavorted in a woodland scene.

"Why, there's a mural on the ceiling!" he exclaimed, his voice echoing in the emptiness. "I didn't notice it this afternoon."

"No one ever does," I replied. "Grandmama always used to complain about how difficult it was to clean."

"How did they go about cleaning it?" Arthur asked.

"The workmen used scaffolds," I said, "and took their time."

We searched the hall and each of the downstairs rooms. We discovered no trace of Claude except in the kitchen where the roast had disappeared from the refrigerator. "He can't be starving to death with that under his belt," Arthur said wryly.

"But it was raw!" I protested.

"Where should we look next?"

"The most logical place would be his room," I said. "It is on the top floor—in the rear."

I suppose neither of us fancied the job we had set ourselves; I know I did not. Arthur climbed the stairs slowly, letting his flashlight's beam seek out each crevice of the area ahead before he set foot in it. I followed him a few feet behind, looking over my shoulder frequently.

Have you ever walked through a lonely old house at night, a place once familiar to you that has become alien and hostile? If you have, you may know how I felt. On the second floor landing I saw briefly, as the flashlight's rays brushed past it, the linen closet where I had hid from my brother as a child in our endless games of hide-and-go-seek. Climbing the stairs to the third floor, I ran my hand along the polished bannister and remembered the long slides I had enjoyed, the shrieking of my voice as, skirts tucked up, I had fallen off in a sprawl at the foot of the stairs. But I remembered no dear one; I had not understood my grandmother in those days, if indeed I understood her now. I had been a lonely child, a fearful one.

Arthur insisted on entering each room on the third floor, on peering into each closet, although by then the house's quiet—old beams should creak, old hinges should protest, here everything was astonishingly and, it seemed to me, preternaturally still—had begun to cause me apprehension. I was not frightened, but I had experienced a heightened wariness, an excess of caution that made me want to urge Arthur on. I felt distinctly that the hazard the house contained increased each moment our search proceeded and the more quickly we ended it in Claude's room the more likely we were to meet with success.

But Arthur would not be hurried. "He could be anywhere,

Abigail," he said loudly after I had asked him in a whisper to hurry—"anywhere at all."

Arthur's voice had a naked sound in the silent house. It rang coldly along the corridors like the tenor rasp of a keen sword jerked from its scabbard.

And, a second later, I heard the tinkle of a music box. It was above us, on the uppermost floor, playing a Strauss waltz —"Tales from the Vienna Woods."

"If he'd known we were comin', he'd've baked a cake," said Arthur.

FIFTEEN

ARTHUR AND I were a quarter of an hour or more climbing the stairs to the fourth floor and making our tedious way to the huge, prison-like room that had been Claude's castle-keep. Our slow progress was not due to hesitation or caution; once we had heard the music box tinkling above our heads, Arthur had bounded for the hall and I had followed as fast as I could. But when the flashlight had been thrown on the flight of steps that led upward, we had seen a veritable maze of cluttered objects with no clear pathway anywhere.

Packing boxes and birdcages, a disembowelled player piano, floor lamps of a decade when tassels and hand painted scenes decorated their shades, a boy's wagon and a doll-carriage, were only some of the articles we had to pull away to get up the stairs laboriously a few steps at a time. Since we had only the flashlight to light our way—we had decided that to switch on the lights would be to signal our intrusion to the policeman outside—it was impossible to clear the stairway sensibly. The objects we pulled from our path fell to our rear, clogging the steps behind.

At the top of the stairs we encountered a new tangle. Clothes of every description were piled helter-skelter on all sides. I recognized rich dresses that must have been my grandmother's, crude over-alls and work shirts, a chauffeur's uniform and a parlormaid's apron. When we had pulled and tugged at these soft things, we unearthed another layer of

obstacles; a sofa with its upholstery torn and the springs protruding like Jacks-In-Boxes, piles of smashed phonograph records and festoons of player piano rolls, a case of books with the glass front smashed and the bindings mildewed, a deck chair with its striped canvas twisted and awry, a door off its hinges.

"He must've been collecting this stuff for years," Arthur said. He swore as his hand caught on a nail and began to bleed. "He must hear us coming. You'd think he would turn off that damn music box."

"Tales from the Vienna Woods" had continued to unfold in the unreal silence of our labor. It was like a dream that you know must end—that is really too preposterous to have meaning—but that persists and becomes more frightening the longer it endures. I tore at the awning-striped material of the deck chair, tossing aside its bare, varnished bones to find behind it a large baby-doll, one of its china blue eyes missing and dirty straw seeping piteously from its smashed, painted mouth. As I picked up the doll, its mechanism worked and it cried like a live thing; my hands dropped it and pulled at a radiator, rusted and scaling, that in its turn rested upon a pile of purple satin sofa pillows bearing the embroidered motto: "Souvenir of Lake Placid." And in the midst of it, a rat squealed and scampered over my hand.

I did not believe the rat. My hands kept working at the pile of pillows, their smooth satin slithering against my flesh. The rat stopped near me, perched itself on the frame of the deck chair that I had pushed aside, its fiery eyes inquisitively regarding me. My hands stopped working and I saw the rat's grey snout wrinkle, baring its yellowish fangs. Then it leaped and I screamed—my hands threw a pillow at it.

The pillow and the fat, squirming body of the rat collided in mid-flight. The rat squealed throatily and fell with a plump onto the gaudy awning seat of the deck chair. The pillow, its work done, collapsed at my feet.

Arthur lurched across a mound of refuse to my side. "What's wrong—" he began, and then he saw the rat, its claws scrabbling as it righted itself for another leap at me from the deck chair. Arthur swore and kicked out at the filthy thing. The toe of his shoe caught it in the belly and

it squealed shrilly, but clung to Arthur's foot, its teeth meshed in the tough leather of his brogue.

I reached wildly into the welter before me, trying to grab out of it some small, heavy object with which to belabor the rat. My hand found something. I hefted it, swung it—again and again—until the rat was a bloody mess. Only then I saw that my hand held a gilt cross, of the kind that adorns an altar.

"This is a mad place," Arthur said. "Do you want to go back?"

I shook my head and began to pull at the radiator again. Arthur's hand clasped my arm, restraining me. "I discovered a sort of path over there," he said, pointing to another part of the crammed corridor. "It must be the way he gets out and in."

He climbed over a pile of refuse and I followed his as best I could, slipping and nearly falling as the oddments beneath me shifted under my weight. There was something that could be called a path on the other side, although it was only a more orderly arrangement of the weird piles of junk that filled the fourth floor. Arthur reached back for my hand and I gave it to him willingly. We began to pick our way along the path.

It was another five minutes before we reached the barred door with its portcullis. This grating hung halfway up so that by stooping we could get under it and to the heavy door which stood ajar on the lighted room. The sound of the music box was louder now and I thought I could hear someone moving about on the other side of the door.

"I ought to go in first," Arthur said. "He has heard us coming and he is ready for us. There's no teling what he will do.

"I will not let you," I said. "You are here on my responsibility, helping me. I want to go first."

We both stepped forward. As Arthur's shoulders brushed against the barred door, it swung heavily open on a clean, well-lighted room. Or so it seemed at first glance. It was certainly an empty room.

The music box, in a carved mahogany cabinet, had been set in the middle of the floor, its lid up, the cylinder revolving, the tiny springs trembling as the spines of the cylinder activated them. I noticed the crank at the box's side—it must

be wound which meant someone was in the room to tend it. We had heard its music for a long time, surely too long for a single winding.

Arthur moved forward cautiously and I ventured in another direction. The room was not as tidy as it appeared at first. The furnishings were of leather and dark wood and the dirt on them had hidden their finish. The books on the shelves were heavy with dust and a framed etching of a stag running across a snow bank had its glass broken and great streaks of damp across its surface that had caused unsightly wrinkles. In one corner of the room was a large bed covered with filthy, greasy sheets—and in the midst of the bed was the half-devoured roast that Arthur had noticed was missing from the refrigerator. The door to the bathroom stood open and a light shone through it.

"He must be in there," Arthur said. He stepped forward again and again I followed him.

But as we neared the door a high-pitched voice—a voice I recognized at once—said sarcastically, "I'm afraid you're in for a disappointment, children."

My brother, Jasper, appeared in the doorway. He wore a sweater, slacks and rubber-soled shoes and he held a small, pearl-handled automatic in his hand. A cigarette stub was stuck between his lips and a thin curl of smoke twined upwards past his eyes. His smile was mocking.

He twirled the automatic negligently about his finger. "Don't be frightened. The gun is only a precaution, in case the steps I heard approaching had belonged to my—I do believe *our?*—quarry."

"What are you doing here?" Arthur blurted.

"Had I less intelligence I'd ask you the same question," Jasper repied. "Only both our responses would be obvious—don't you think, Abbie dearest? We're all here to find Claude—and we've failed miserably."

"You came here for Claude too?" I asked.

"I underrated your sense of duty, dear sister," Jasper said. "I thought it would content itself with the forms of filial piety—or, to be honest and vulgar, that you'd lack the guts to hunt down our lunatic father. And I thought one of us should do it. For all I knew the poor creature was starving—although I see he is capable of foraging." Jasper pointed in-

dolently at the gnawed roast in the middle of the piled bed.

"I didn't know you knew—that grandmama had told you about Claude," I said.

"No one ever told me in so many words," Jasper answered. "But it was an ill-kept secret, don't you think? Not so great an honor, Abigail, to have a coarse, slavering brute for a father."

"I've never seen him," I said. "But I'm sure—"

"Neither have I seen him," Jasper interrupted. "But I can imagine his appearance from the condition of this room, the way he feeds himself—and the filthy clutter out there." He pointed to the hall.

"Let's not squabble," Arthur said. "Let's decide what to do."

"An excellent suggestion, Mr.—Mr. Crump, isn't it? What an odd name. It is really our own?" my brother said. "But first I'd like both of your opinions on why Claude has collected such a pile of rubbish?"

Jasper looked at me, but I did not trust myself to speak. As I had gazed about at the pitiable condition of the room, my throat had become choked and I had grown tense with anxiety. The man who had lived in this room was little better than an animal. Yet I was no longer certain I knew what had brutalized him. I could have said nothing sensible.

"Father—*your* father—is insane," Arthur said to Jasper. "It's unmistakably clear, isn't it? It isn't unusual for the insane to gather and hoard a wild collection of useless things." I saw that Arthur's eyes glistened and that his face was pale. I respected him for his feelings.

"He must've been loose for quite some time. Isn't that how it strikes you?" Jasper asked softly.

"What are you trying to say, Jasper?" My voice was harsh with the strain I exerted to keep it under control. The atmosphere of the room was fetid with an odor that I associated with zoos; there was no rest for my eyes wherever I looked, but only further detail of my father's debasement.

"I understand him," Arthur said, his glance full on Jasper. The two men stood confronting each other, engaged in a tacit struggle. "You believe Claude killed her," Arthur said evenly. "You believe that he had been terrorizing her for many months and that finally she died of it. You think that explains why the servants left."

Jasper let his cigarette fall to the floor and covered it with his foot. "Something like that must've happened," he said. "How else explain it?"

"But what about the circle of footprints?" Arthur asked. "And the letters to each of you?"

"You may have convinced the Inspector that the footprints existed," Jasper said, "but I knew it was a lie as soon as I heard it. Abigail persuaded you to join her in it, because she is so proud. She would rather have it known that Ella had been frightened to death by the family ghost, than let the world realize that her father was a homicidal idiot."

"It wasn't a lie," Arthur said, his mouth tense and his face flushed. "I saw those footprints."

"I didn't," Jasper replied arrogantly. "Abigail had conveniently removed them in your absence. The Inspector didn't see them. Do you think he believes such an outlandish tale? What I can't understand is, if you and Abigail were bound to try to cover up Claude's dirty work, why didn't you select a more believable set of circumstances?"

Arthur glowered at him, but he did not answer. I felt that Arthur, himself, did not wholly believe that the footprints were not some contrivance of my own. He had not been with me when I discovered them—he had come later to find me in a faint. Was this why he could not outface Jasper's audacity?

"What about the letters, Jasper? Did I forge them?" I asked.

"I wouldn't put it past you," he said. "If you'd known that grandmama was in danger of her life from Claude—and none of us had more opportunity to know—you could've written those letters to get us all on the scene. You might've hoped that one of us might interfere with Claude and save grandmama. Or you might've known that it was already too late to help Ella and were wishing to drag all of us into it just to obscure the fact that our father was criminally insane."

"That is preposterous!" I said. "Aren't you overlooking the fact that Claude would have no reason for killing grandmama? Hadn't she looked after him all these years?"

"She was his keeper all these years," Jasper replied with a smirk. He liked nothing better than to win an argument with me. "Animals have been known to turn on their keepers."

"If Claude killed her," Arthur interrupted, "how did he kill her? By poisoning her? Wouldn't that be asking too much of the intelligence of the—the person who lived in this room and collected all that trash?"

"And what about the fact that mother saw Ella alive this morning? And so did Maud and Oliver—if Oliver is to be believed?" I went on to tell my brother the differing accounts of my mother, my sister and her husband regarding their experiences that morning with my grandmother.

"I don't know how to explain everything that happened—yet," Jasper said weakly. "But—"

"What's that!" Arthur demanded.

A loud, bubbling, groaning sound had startled us. I turned around, expecting to see I do not know what. Arthur had already faced the door leading to the hall. Jasper sprang to another door and flung it open—a door I had forgotten existed. As this door opened, the sound grew louder, became a maniacal shrieking.

The second door opened onto a large dumbwaiter shaft. It was nearly as large as an elevator shaft, having been built to handle the bulky supplies of a truly great house; the dumbwaiter itself was manipulated by means of ropes and an overhead block and tackle that had been counter-weighted. The shaft opened onto every floor and the basement—as children we had given each other rides on the contraption.

The screaming continued, but we realized that it came from one of the floors below. I could not tell whether the anguished sound—it had a grating, mechanical quality that was terrifying—was coming closer or only growing louder.

"Two of us can get out of here in this," Jasper said, looking at me and pointing at the dumbwaiter. I saw that the platform was already in position. "It's the way I came up," he said. "It may be the way Claude gets in and out. But I don't think it will hold a third." Jasper turned completely around to face Arthur. I did too. Jasper's mouth dropped open.

Arthur had gone. I listened and I could hear him scrambling through the junk and litter of the hall and the stairway. I started to follow him.

"Don't be a fool," Jasper said. "If he wants to kill himself, let him."

"What do you mean?"

"Claude's coming up here! Don't you know that? He's coming up those stairs—can't you hear him? If you go the way your boy friend's gone, you'll meet him—and he'll get rid of you as he did grandmama." Jasper was making hysterical beckoning motions to me.

I went closer to the dumbwaiter, but I did not climb up into it as Jasper did while I watched. "Only a moment ago you were saying that Claude used the dumbwaiter to get in and out. Isn't it equally dangerous?"

"Some other time—yes. But this time he's coming up the stairs. Can't you hear him?"

I listened and I did hear a heavy sound, relatively near, that could have been a heavy person clumsily pushing aside the rubbish and climbing the stairs. But it also could have been Arthur going down. I said as much to Jasper.

He reached out and clutched my hand, pulled as hard as he could. I was off my balance and he succeeded in hauling me into the dumbwaiter with him. The door swung shut with a loud bang. It had a spring come-back and it had been held open only by the weight of my body leaning against it.

I was in total darkness with Jasper. His hand was cold and wet with perspiration—I could smell his panic. The shaft the dumbwaiter hung in, swaying dizzly each time we shifted our bodies, had the musty stench of disuse.

I thought of the rat in the rubble and as I thought my hand went our protectively. My knuckles struck the wall—damp and greasy. I heard a small skittering sound, then another—and another. I had knocked some creature—creatures?—off the wall of the shaft and sent them plummeting. "Mice!" I shrilled.

"Only flakes of whitewash," Jasper said "These are close quarters so keep your hands to yourself. I'm going to try to get us down. Don't move or shift your weight—the damn thing's probably overloaded as it is."

I felt and heard my brother get himself slowly and ponderously into a kneeling position so that he could reach both of the controlling ropes. One rope pulled the platform up, the other pulled it down. Jasper wanted to go down but I could not blame him for wanting the other rope within easy reach.

We might find something at the bottom of the shaft that

would make it important for us to go up again as fast as we could.

The dumbwaiter moved slowly, the old pulleys creaking, the platform heaving and tilting. Jasper would strike a match and cup it in his hands against the draft that whistled up the shaft. By its flickering, sulphurous light we would try to discern the numbers of the floors.

"The paint has scaled on the numbers," Jasper said, "but if you look closely you'll see notches someone has cut at each level. One notch for the first floor, two notches for the second —and so on."

The match would burn his fingers. He would swear crossly and reach for the rope again. He would pitch and jerk another minute or so—always going downward—and then another match would splutter to life beneath his fingernail.

For the first few minutes that we were in the shaft we could clearly hear the screaming going on. Once I thought I heard footsteps pounding along a hall, but Jasper said it was my imagination. Then there was silence.

Silence was the worst of all.

Jasper lighted his seventh match—I had been keeping count of the meager flares with superstitious accuracy—and we both saw at once two notches cut deep into the damp whitewash.

"Let's get out," I said.

Jasper had begun to protest—I never knew why. A calamitous noise shut off his words, caused the ropes and platform to tremble and filled my ears with reverberating din.

It was a series of sounds, perhaps a second apart. Except that there had been a clangor to it with what seemed the detonation, I should have thought the first was an explosion of dynamite. Each sound was equally loud, but as my deafened ears became accustomed to the loudness—the sounds continued for a considerable time—I knew that the noise must be that of something falling, falling possibly downstairs, because the reports were coming more quickly then and I noticed the clangor, as of a steel drum on a stone, with each startling repetition.

"My God, what's that?" Jasper asked in a shaking whisper.

Before I could answer I heard a police whistle—several peremptory blasts.

The sound continued, but not for long after the whistle had been blown.

"I don't know," I said, "but I'm going to get out of here."

I pushed open the door and nearly fell through it. I picked myself up to see that the door had shut again, Jasper had chosen to stay huddled inside. I could hardly blame him, but in a dangerous situation I prefer the open to the enclosed.

My hands tightly balled into ineffectual fists, the blood throbbing in my throat as never before in my sheltered life, I began to walk in the direction of the great staircase.

I was nearly at its head when the huge crystal chandelier in the grand hall leaped into dusty scintillation.

And I saw a terrible blob of blood and flesh sprawled part way down the marble stairs.

I later learned that it had been Claude—my father.

SIXTEEN

THERE ARE SOME scenes you come upon in life that are too complex and unexpected for either the eye or the mind to take in entirely at once. The scene that met my eyes as I stood at the head of the staircase looking down it into the great hall was such a one. I shall only be reporting accurately if I describe its many aspects one at a time as I became aware of them.

The crushed body of what had been a middle-aged man—I could tell by the clothes and the size of the nearly shapeless thing on the stairs—first held my attention unswervingly. I should have liked to look away, but it was as impossible as it would have been if I had attempted to move. There were dirty grey trousers, already stained with swiftly welling bright blood, a torn and greasy shirt and a colored rag that had been a tie. Something that could have been an arm and a hand lay askew the clothes; it was crushed flattened as was the rest of the corpse. The feet were a huddle of smashed bones and torn skin—there were no shoes. Why had he not had shoes? I thought. Not to have had shoes was pathetic.

The garden roller next came to my attention. It lay at the

bottom of the staircase, its surface slick with blood, a smeared track behind it all the way back to the body. I knew immediately that the roller, of a large size and apparently fully weighted by the water it contained, had caused the clamorous, all but explosive, sounds Jasper and I heard in the dumbwaiter shaft. Someone had pushed the massive roller—it must have weighed a quarter of a ton—down the stairs after the man. In the dark he had not seen it coming and it knocked him down, rolled over him and continued loudly humping down each step to the last. "The poor devil," someone near me said. "He got his due."

I turned about to realize that Edward Presscott, his face white and his mouth open, his tanned hand pulling restlessly at his cheek, stood beside me at the head of the staircase.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I felt I had to come back," he said, "after your mother told me about Claude. It's pretty clear that he killed your grandmother, isn't it?" He pointed to the body.

I had come to the house in search of Claude. Arthur, Jasper and I had spent the last half-hour discussing him; but it had not as yet occured to me that the shapeless corpse upon the stairs could ever have been my father. My hand went to my mouth to stifle a cry. I must have seemed about to fall, because Edward sprang forward and caught hold of me, his strong hands steadying me. The color had returned to his face and as I looked into it his expression was as usual bronze and inscrutable.

"Don't move! Stay where you are! Each of you stay where you were when the lights went on!" It was Inspector Stephen Eliot's voice, shouting loudly and with a certain anxiety, from the great hall. Edward and I looked down and we saw the Inspector, two uniformed policemen with guns drawn beside him, running forward towards the stairs. But the police were not all that we saw.

There were two other people in the large hall. Maud Derwent stood with her back to the far wall about twenty feet away from the front door. She wore a long coat and a felt hat that she had pulled far down to hide her red-gold hair. Her hands were clasped in front of her in a prayerful attitude. I could not see her face.

Shirley stood near the door. She had on dungarees be-

neath a polo coat. She was smoking a cigarette and her feet were planted apart, her hands on her hips. "Old home week," I heard her say mockingly. And then, "That isn't Jasper staining the stairs?"

The Inspector and the policemen had reached the body. Eliot gave it a quick glance, as the taller, rangier one of the two police knelt beside the body. He turned to the other, who had removed his cap and had a pencil ready to scribble on the pad concealed in its crown. "Get to a phone and call Homicide, Murphy. Tell them we'll need a couple of smart research boys on this one if we're even going to identify the body."

Murphy hurried down the stairs and out the door, his heels clattering on the marble and hardwood. The rangy policeman looked up, a grin on his prominent, sallow face. "May not be that hard, Inspector," he said. "I know this guy. I used to see him all the time—he's a well-known character around here—"

"Keep your voice down," the Inspector said, all trace of politeness gone from his manner—"the murderer may be listening."

Ten minutes later, though, when the Inspector had assembled all of us in the back drawing room for the second time in twenty-four hours, he had lost his brusqueness and had regained his devious tact. Jasper had appeared in the second floor hall a few minutes after the lights had gone on and Eliot had noticed him at once. "I thought you'd be here too," he had said. "Well, you'll answer questions like the rest of them."

Only Arthur was missing. The last I knew he had been clambering through the maze of refuse on the fourth floor to get to whoever had been screaming. I wondered if he had seen what had happened and had concealed himself—or had escaped by the servants' entrance—before the lights went on. I hoped that was the explanation for his absence, although I could not be sure.

Since there were fewer of us, Lizbeth and Oliver, as well as Arthur, being absent, we all sat near the Inspector who had preempted grandmama's ladder-backed chair again. Jasper sat nervously, his hands working at the material of his

trousers. Shirley appeared calm enough, but she smoked incessantly. Edward was stiff and straight, his face stamped out of blank metal. Maud still had her hands clasped in front of her as though she were offering a prayer.

Stephen Eliot opened his notebook and turned down a page. He held his pen poised, but he did not write. His smile was slight and the gold flecks in his dark eyes seemed dulled. "We've established the identity of the body," he said. "I sincerely hope it comes to none of you as a shock." He paused and looked at me kindly. "The body on the stairs was named Claude Bryant."

"Father!" Maud said and began at once to weep hysterically. Jasper turned to regard her, but he did nothing. Edward put his hand out and patted her shoulder awkwardly. He tried to make a soothing sound in his throat.

Stephen Eliot's expression became severe. "You say that Claude Bryant was your father?" he asked. I felt that he already knew the facts, but wanted us to tell him on the chance that we might divulge other information.

Jasper answered for Maud, who was having real difficulty overcoming her grief—if that was what had affected her. "If you are certain the body is Claude's, then it is our father's," Jasper said. He tittered nervously and I felt like slapping him. "Ella tried to keep it secret that he was insane, but it looks like he did her in finally."

"And now one of us has k-killed him," Maud wailed.

"Edward, can't you shut her up?" Shirley said between her teeth.

Edward, unhappily, began to shake his mistress's shoulder. He did it half-heartedly and Maud's sobs grew louder.

"She could be right at that," said the Inspector. "But you needn't fear to say anything about your father that I don't know."

"But you don't know anything about Claude," I said—"or do you?"

Eliot turned his steady gaze on me and at once I regretted having spoken. I had forgotten since that afternoon how uncomfortable his scrutiny could be. "If it had been on you, Miss Longstreet, that my information about your father depended, I would still think he had died in the first war. Fortunately, I have other sources—including the addresses of

the servants Ella last employed. One of my assistants discovered them in a desk upstairs. And then Officer Murphy identified the corpse as that of a harmless psychopath who has ranged the neighborhood at times—and then has sometimes been absent for weeks or more."

"But that can't be," I said. "Claude was kept in a heavily-barred room on the fourth floor so that he couldn't get out." I knew as I said this that Claude obviously had been getting out. The rubbish in the hall outside his room gave evidence of this fact.

"Claude could get out,'" Jasper said. He told the Inspector about the dumbwaiter and described the way it opened onto Claude's room.

"When we were children," I added, "the door from the dumbwaiter to Claude's room had been sealed—and we were warned never to take it above the third floor."

"That didn't stop us," Jasper said, reminiscently. "I know we used to speculate about what was on the other side of that sealed door."

"Grandmama used to say that the fourth floor was used only to store things," I said.

Inspector Eliot snapped open his cigar case irritably and took out a cigar. I saw that he had laid in a fresh supply since the case was now bulging with panatellas. He did not handle the cigar with the care he had shown that afternoon and evening, though; he bit off the end, thrust it into his mouth and lighted it. He chewed out his next words, the cigar bobbing irascibly between his lips. "One of my assistants reported to me today that the fourth floor was piled high with trash. I told him that we could check through it tomorrow. In the Collyer case it took them weeks to go through all the accumulation of rubbish." He stopped and glared at me. "I'll give you one more opportunity to tell me all you know, Miss Longstreet."

I decided that I had better do as he said. I told him all that I knew about Claude, my father, everything that grandmama had told me that day fifteen years before.

When I had finished, Eliot said, "I suppose you realize that we could have saved your father's life if we had known this earlier today. Why did you withhold it?"

"I didn't want the reporters to learn of my father's in-

capacity. When they hear that grandmama kept Claude locked in a room for decades, they will make a scandal of it." I spoke in a low voice that, despite my efforts, was choked with fear and emotion. It had been the worst day I had ever lived through and I did not believe it could ever end.

"I wish I could believe that was your only reason," the Inspector said. "It may be at that—but if it was, why did you and Arthur Crump come back to this house tonight? And where is Arthur Crump now?"

I told him I did not know where Arthur was and described in detail how Arthur and I had entered the house and had climbed laboriously through the labyrinth of rubbish to reach Claude's stronghold. When I got to the part about finding Jasper in the room ahead of us, Eliot snapped a question at my brother.

"What were you doing there?" he demanded.

"I came back to the house for the same reason my sister did," Jasper replied uneasily, attempting to smile. "Shirley, my wife, came with me, but when I told her that I was going up to Claude's room she refused to go with me. She stayed downstairs where you found her."

Stephen Eliot allowed us to see plainly that he was displeased with the way events had gone. "Why couldn't one of you—any one of you—have been honest with me this afternoon?" he asked with a pretense of humility. He regarded Maud. "Only you even hinted at the truth about your father, but you had to state it in the form of a childhood memory brought out under psychoanalysis."

Maud had at last stopped crying, but she was still far from calm. "I told you all I knew. I didn't know anything about father. I thought he was dead." Her eyes were on the Inspector's face, but they were as opaque as mirrors. She had spoken artlessly, as if she had not willed it.

"You have to understand, Inspector—" Jasper began.

"I don't have to understand anything!" the Inspector said flatly. He was angry and the gold lights in his eyes had grown brilliant again. "I know you have all played the police for fools. With all your money and your breeding, you can't get away with murder in New York City. And Claude's death is unequivocally murder."

"You could let him say what he wanted to tell you," I

told Eliot. I did not care for the way he was behaving. The man had manners and he should use them; they were supposed to be his long suit, weren't they?

Eliot nodded his head and waited for Jasper to continue with as much ill grace as seemed possible.

"I wanted to say," Jasper told him, "that none of us, except for Abigail, knew about Claude. I know I had my suspicions. I suppose mother knew—I don't know about you, Edward. I guess what I'm saying is that some of us—I, at least, and my wife, Shirley—didn't know for sure that father was still alive." He had said it lamely, but his stumbling abetted his sincerity.

"None of you even told me what you suspected," Eliot said sulleny. I realized that he was tired and that he had been driving himself all day.

"It's water over the dam," I said. "Isn't it best to look for Arthur now?" I had become worried about my young man. It was not like him to disappear.

"One of my assistants is looking for Mr. Crump," the Inspector said. I had the definite impression that he was not telling me all the truth.

Eliot smiled at me quizzically. He had been silent for a moment and in that brief space he had seemed to draw on fresh energy. His face appeared to grow younger and less tense and his glance was ironic. "I can see you don't believe me, Miss Longstreet. Well, at the worst, I've turned the tables on you."

He looked about at the rest of us, his gaze finally falling upon Edward. "How did you happen to come here tonight?" Eliot inquired.

"My reason was the same as Abigail's," Edward replied. He had answered simply and promptly and his look was candid. "After we left this afternoon, Lizbeth told me more than I had known before about her first husband. She said her mother had told her that Claude had died in the late 'Twenties—but after the events of the past day she was fearful that he might yet be alive—alive and mad. She asked me to come here tonight."

"What did you say when she told you that?" the Inspector asked.

Edward remained candid. He gave the impression of a man

who had given up any defense he might have offered and was determined to answer every question with complete honesty. I am innocent, his manner said, and I have nothing to lose. "I was angry. I told her that if Claude was alive, she was a bigamist. I reminded her that if he had really been insane, she could have had a divorce. I let her know that I felt she had treated me badly."

"And why did she say she hadn't divorced Claude?"

Edward shrugged and smiled ruefully. "She gave me an answer that I believe, that I must believe because it is the explanation for so much that my wife or other members of family do. She said that Ella Longstreet had forbidden her to divorce her first husband because of the notoriety a a legal action would have caused."

Eliot's cigar had gone out and he re-lighted it carefully. As he puffed on the foul thing, he glanced through the clouds of bluish smoke at my sister, Maud. "And why did you come back to this house tonight, Mrs. Derwent?"

Maud sat straight on the edge of her chair, her hands still clasped rigidly in front of her. Shirley sat beside her, an arm about her to give her the support she needed. "I followed Edward," she said in a low, brittle voice. "I had tried to get him on the phone repeatedly tonight, but the maid kept saying he wasn't at home. I was afraid that—"

"Maud," Edward said softly, tensely.

"I was afraid to be alone, I meant to say," Maud continued swiftly. "I felt if I could see Edward, alone, for just a minute, everything would be all right. I went to his house and stood across the street from it. I saw him come out and get in a taxi before I could catch his attention. I hailed the first taxi I could—and I followed him here. When I reached here, the house was dark. I was standing in the hall, trying to decide what I should do, when I heard that terrible sound."

"You didn't hear a scream?" Jasper asked.

"No—should I have?"

Jasper turned to the Inspector. "If she didn't hear a scream, she must've just arrived when the roller went down the stairs."

The Inspector nodded his head. "I expected each of you to return to the house tonight. I can't say yet how much I knew, when I first saw you today, about the circumstances surrounding this house. But I can tell you that none of you

have really disappointed me tonight. Had I known all about Claude—and I would have if I had sent my men to examine the fourth floor or any of you had volunteered a little more of what you knew—I might have been able to prevent tonight's crime. But, as Miss Longstreet said, that's water over the dam.

"My men found your husband, Mrs. Derwent, lurking beneath one of the bushes at the front of the house. He had been seen to enter the grounds after you and Mr. Presscott—in fact, each of you was seen to enter—even you, Miss Longstreet, and Mr. Crump, despite your elaborate attempt to deceive us—because we were expecting you.

"In a crime as elaborate as the murder of Ella Longstreet, it is very difficult for the murderer to cover all his tracks. And in a crime where there is so much window dressing, it is logical to infer that one or more persons interfered with the plans of the murderer. Some of the window dressing might be accidental, you see. Some might help conceal the identity of the criminal, but some might help reveal it. I rather counted on each of you returning to the scene of the crime tonight. And I shall oblige you by telling you which one of you murdered Ella and Claude before the cock crows." He looked at his watch. "Since it is now two, I have only a few hours."

"But if we all returned," Edward asked, "where is Lizbeth?"

"Lizbeth is in the kitchen, making us all some tea. We'll need it before the night's up. Her taxi arrived just as my assistants and I had given her up and were coming out from behind trees and lamposts and what-not to enter the house. She came with us, under police escort as it were, and I thought she might as well be usefully employed while I badgered you."

The door to the back drawing room opened and my mother entered, followed by rangy Officer McHugh, each laden with tea things.

"I do hope there's nothing in it this time," the Inspector said with lugubrious wit.

SEVENTEEN

THE TEA MET with Inspector Stephen Eliot's approval and he drank two steaming cups of it. "I took the precaution of sending out for a fresh packet," he said, while sipping his second cup, "to assure myself that this time the brew would not be adulterated."

I shall admit that I always like tea, but that night it had a particularly welcome stimulus. I was aware that the Inspector was further along with the case than he had been when he had hurried us away from the house early that same evening. To my mind the events of the day had only added confusion to perplexity and I could not perceive a pattern. But I felt that when Eliot had finished with his tea, he would have matter to talk of that would influence all our lives. I was not mistaken.

"The city pathologists have learned to respect my wishes," the Inspector said, laying aside his cup and lighting a fresh cigar. He smoked tranquilly, pleased at his beginning and by our attention. "Today I requested them to perform the post mortem analysis on the body of Ella Longstreet with the utmost haste as well as their usual precision. Aaah-hmn! I've their report with me now."

He reached into his pocket and withdrew the bulky notebook. The edge of tension in the room was like a palpable thing, a knife at each of our throats. Edward's face was like that of an idol's, stern and remote. My brother, Jasper, more than ever resembled a water color of a *fin de siecle* voluptuary, possibly by the mordant brush of a Whistler or a Toulouse-Lautrec. Maud was a martyr, pinioned on her chair, her brow damp, her red-gold curls like stigmata. Shirley's expression was that of a cornered fox, crafty and pained. Only Officer McHugh was untroubled, but he was also ill-at-ease: he was having his difficulties balancing his cup and his cap.

"I shall interpret the findings of the medical men." Inspector Eliot said, after having read slowly and throughly the report once again. "There are details here of interest to doctors and detectives that would but bore you. Aah-yes! Well, the gist of it is that Ella Longstreet starved to death—

terrible, isn't it?—even though there were other complications.

"Yes, they seem to think the principal cause was malnutrition. But they found the typical 'hour-glass' ventricle that occurs in cases of chronic digitalis poisoning, and also a thickening of the coronary artery which would indicate an arteriosclerosis of some extent. They say that the old lady didn't have enough to eat, that she had developed a tolerance for massive doses of digitalis—the stuff in the tea, you know—and that if these two factors weren't enough, there was also the arteriosclerosis. That, incidentally, means that her powers of memory and reasoning might not at all times have been all they should."

"My grandmama was not insane," I said.

Eliot smiled at me blandly. "None of us could go so far as to say that on the basis of this alone." He rapped the page of the report smartly with his finger. "But she was in her eighties, I believe? Aah-yes! And old ladies of that age do have difficulties with their memories, as well as losing some of the other powers of their youth? She was blind, remember, and an old blind woman, without servants or anyone to speak to but a psychopath, would be inclined to treat less and less of this world." Eliot let his voice trail off. There was a stir in the room as more of the family than myself showed their embarrassment.

Eliot nodded his head. "I'll be the first to admit that it isn't a pleasant subject—indeed, before the night's up we should all know that we have come to grips with a tragedy. But I don't have to impress you any longer with my speculations. Their only purpose was to set the stage for the evidence." He looked about him until his eyes rested on the policeman. "Officer McHugh, will you fetch Mrs. Parsons?"

McHugh jumped to his feet and left the room with equal alacrity. "Mrs. Parsons was the last of the servants to leave this house," the Inspector said. "In fact, I found from a study of Ella Longstreet's own records in her desk upstairs that Mamie Parsons had been here as short a time as six weeks ago."

"I don't understand," I said, "why, if grandmama needed servants, she didn't instruct me to interview new applicants for her?" My head had begun to ache, although I felt less

tired than before. The thought of my grandmother's suffering shamed me.

The Inspector bestowed upon me a bengin look, a glance such as he might have given a dumb animal before delivering the blow that put an end to its misery. "I could answer your question, Miss Longstreet, but I have learned that you have a tendency to question certain of my assertions. I would prefer to let Mamie Parsons speak for herself, and after you have heard what she has to say about your grandmother and this house, you may at last give up the fight."

I did not like his imputation and I was about to tell him so—as if the simple, filial act of defending my grandmama's good name were hypocrisy!—when there was a commotion at the door and my attention, along with that of all the others in the room, was distracted.

A large, middle-aged woman who resembled a tub surmounted by a mop-head bustled into the room. Her face was huge, balloon-like and irate. Her eyes were bright blue and filled with cold fire and her short arms pumped excitedly back and forth as if it were by their motion that she propelled herself. In that first, astonished glimpse of Mamie Parsons—I must have known her before since I had interviewed her once, but if so she had changed beyond recognition—I must confess that I doubted she had legs. They were wholly hidden by her tent of a flowered cotton skirt and she gave the impression of a ball rolling to smite a ten-pin.

"The idea!" she cried in a voice that was at once gruff and shrill, more like a two-toned steamboat whistle than a human register. "The idea of gettin' a soul up out of its warm bed to ask it questions that are blatherin' nonsense—and then to make a soul sit in a police car by the hour for no good on this earth! Shame on you!" She had ceased to roll a foot or so from the unperturbed Inspector, and now she stood looking up at him—for Eliot had risen from his chair—shaking a fat, reddened finger under his long nose.

"You want to help us bring justice to the one responsible for your former employer's death, don't you, Mrs. Parson?" the Inspector asked calmly. He did move his face slightly to avoid the finger of wrath, but the digit followed him.

"She was a spiteful, old wretch and she deserved all that was coming to her," Mamie said righteously. "Not that I

think the maniac shouldn't be caged. They're places for poor, benighted fools like him—and I told Mrs. Longstreet so time and again. I said, it's none of me business, missus, but that Claude of yours will be bashing in your pate yet—you mark me words. But she wouldn't listen to good advice—not she. That one would rather go about accusin' innocent people of the things that her own kin were doin' against her."

The Inspector had held up his hand to quieten Mamie long before she drew a breath and thus stopped her rattling flow of speech. "If you will only answer the questions I put to you, Mrs. Parsons—and not run on like that—you'll get home and in bed more quickly."

"You asked me if I wanted to see justice done—and I told you," Mamie insisted.

Eliot smiled and shook his head. "How long were you employed by Mrs. Longstreet?" he asked.

"It would have been ten years this October," Mamie said. "And I wouldn't have left her when I did, had it been my own choosin'. Not that she deserved a poor woman's kindness."

"She paid you well, didn't she?" I asked. I remembered Mamie now—she had been Ella's cook and laundress. She had stayed longer than any of the others.

"I'm not complainin' about the pay, miss," Mamie said, turning to me and giving me an obsequious smile. "It's the indecency of bein' turned out with no warnin' and no notice—just like she done to Tom and Alec—and Mabel too. Though, I do say, that one—that Mabel—deserved some of what she got. Always carryin' tales, that one was."

"Are you saying that Mrs. Longstreet discharged each of her staff suddenly and without notice?" the Inspector asked.

Mamie bobbed her head and her entire tub-like body quivered within the tent of her dress. "Alec was the first," she said. "He who was the butler, She called him into her room one day and told him that he was plottin' against her. 'Why, mum, I who can speak for them will say that.' And she gave him the eye—it was a wicked eye she had, that one—a layin' back in her bed—she'd already took to her bed then and it was only January—and she said, 'I'm not asking you about the other servants, Alec. I'm askin after yourself. And I can see by your look that you're lyin'—that you did plot to do me in.

Take your things and get out, man, before I call in the police.' And he did as she said, him that was as honest as the day. And he got out and she hired no one—no one at all to take his place. And with all the work not gettin' any lighter, her a layin' up in bed like a queen she wasn't."

Again Mamie had to stop for breath and the Inspector seized the opportunity to ask another question.

"You say Alec, the butler, was discharged in January. And no one else was hired to take his place?"

"That's right. But he wasn't the only one—"

"Just a moment, Mrs. Parsons. Please let me ask the questions and then you give me the answers as simply as you can." Eliot paused and chewed on his cigar. I could see that his temper was rising. "You said that Mrs. Longstreet was confined to her bed at the time she discharged the butler. I believe I also gathered that she remained in her bed as long as you stayed in the house. Is that correct?"

"That is the God's truth!" exclaimed Mamie. "And there was nothing wrong with her except her own deviltry. If you ask me, that one had done a terrible thing to someone and as she grew old it came to her that she would get her due. If you ask me she was expecting to get her due every day that she lived—and that's why she kept talking about poison."

"Ella Longstreet thought someone was poisoning her?" Inspector Eliot inquired. His words were quick and loud—and, for him, excited.

"She accused us one and all, sooner or later. She even refused to eat what I cooked up for her—the tastiest dishes she'd ever smacked a lip over! I tell you there was a burthen of guilt on that one's soul and she knew that she was goin' to burn in Hell for it. But why she should go around accusin' innocents of hurrying her to her doom is beyond the likes of me."

Mrs. Parsons did not give me the impression that anything was beyond her. Yet there was no disputing the sincerity of what she had to say. If Eliot had told me that my grandmother had dismissed her retinue because she feared they were poisoning her, I would have insisted that he was mistaken. Mamie Parsons was a different matter, though. I did not know what to think.

"And do you think anyone was poisoning your employer, Mrs. Parsons?" the Inspector asked.

"Not any of us. No, not anyone at all, if you asks my opinion." Mamie's mophead waggled back and forth energetically and I expected to see bits of lint and dust scattering from it. "I always said it was in her imagination. Not that the crazy one might not have been givin' it to her on the sly. Now there's a thought."

"The crazy one?" the Inspector asked. "By that you mean Claude Bryant?"

"The very same. Though she never called him anything but Claude. If you says his last name were Bryant, I can only put in that you must know. That Claude was always snoopin' about on the sly. He was always a 'collectin' things. I'd find a baby doll with its stuffin's leakin' all over my sink—or a woman's underthings, all dirty with cinders, from where that one had snitched them from a trash can or worse."

"Claude was locked in his room, Inspector," I said. "Ask her who let him out?"

Mamie regarded me, her bright eyes sparkling blue with malice. "There's not everything you know, now is there, miss—despite all your grand airs and your letters to your grandma?" She turned back to the Inspector. "Why, who'd you think let the crazy one out—that Claude—but Ella, herself? She come to me one day and says she's had herself a dream. And in this dream, she says, she saw the whole house afire and burnin' bright. Oh, she says, it was terrible—and what did I think? I says, 'If you asks me, missis, it's a vision sent to torment you for your wrongs.' 'That's not it at all,' she says, 'and it's wicked of you to suggest such a thing.' Wicked—me that was wicked—and who, I asks you, had the dream she was tellin' me about—her or me? 'Then, missis,' I says, 'what d'you think it means?' And she says that she thinks the meanin' is as clear as can be—it's been a warnin' to her that if there was a fire, the poor loony would be caught in his room and roasted to a turn. And so she tells me to call the carpenters to unseal the door to the dumbwaiter and show the loony that it's no longer all stuck up—'so's if there's a fire, he can have a way to get out.' "

"And did you have the carpenters unseal the door to the dumbwaiter?" Eliot asked.

"Those were her orders, wasn't they? What could a poor working woman like myself do but obey the missis's orders, even if I thought they was daft?"

"And after the door to the dumbwaiter was put in order, did Claude ever use it?" the Inspector inquired.

"After that the loony had the run of the house," Mamie said, making a clucking sound with her tongue to show her disapproval. "At first, he came down only at night, when most of us were asleep—and I only knew he'd been about from the mess he'd make in the refrigerator—not that we wasn't feeding him, a big tray under his door three times a day and my back near breaking from liftin' that iron thing. But then after the dumbwaiter was fixed, I took to sendin' his trays up in that and it wasn't so bad."

Inspector Eliot pulled his cigar from his mouth and examined it critically. He had smoked the thing halfway down, but already he had chewed the end into a pulp. I remembered the careful way he had handled the unsmoked cigars the previous afternoon. Could it be that as a case progressed his smoking habits worsened with his temper?

"You say that at first he came down only at night. Does that mean that later Claude began to leave his room at other times?" Stephen Eliot asked.

Mamie nodded her head vigorously. "Within the month he was all over the house at all the hours of the day or night. Not that we minded the poor loony—he'd only stand around and watch you with those great watery eyes he had. Sometimes he'd make a kind of hummin' sound in his throat as if he was tryin' to say somethin'. Then he began to disappear—none of us would see him for days at a time. He'd be out and around—in the Park like as not. Well, as I said to Tom, the loony's got a life to live like any of the rest of us."

"You would say that Claude Bryant was gentle—not violent?" was the Inspector's next question.

"I'd not say that. With them that is daft, it only takes the once to do you in. No right-minded person can say what goes on in the heads of the loonys—I used to pray every night that it wouldn't be this soul he'd light into when his time come."

"But you never saw him do anything violent?" the Inspector asked.

"Well, there was the once that he came into the kitchen and

hung around. He kept following me about, dogging me footsteps—and when I'd turn to look at him, his great watery eyes would be on mine like a dog's. He'd kept makin' those funny sounds deep in his throat—half a hum and half a growl they were—and it occurs to me that he was up to something. I made the sign of the cross and he went away mutterin' to himself. Later, I got took all a-funny a thinkin' what he might've been up to if I hadn't made the precious sign."

"You say that he would leave the house and be gone for days at a time. When did he begin to do that?"

"That was late in March, after both Mabel and Tom had left. I was all alone with the loony and the missis then—and the missis not stirrin' out of her bed from one day to the next. I tried to stop him goin' out by taking away his shoes, but that didn't stop him, not that one."

I knew then why my father had not had shoes. A lump came into my throat and stayed there and the room became misty and dim before my eyes. He had been gentle and he had tried to talk to this ignorant superstitious woman. He might have been asking her to return his shoes. And she had treated him as if he were a dog—she had thought of him as a dog to be bullied and cursed and feared. It was not right.

"When did you leave Mrs. Longstreet's employ, Mrs. Parsons?" the Inspector asked.

"It was in the first week of May—I won't forget that day easy, I tell you. The sixth of May, it was. I come up to her, a layin' in bed as if the world owed to her what I cooked with me poor hands with my back breakin' from the bendin' over, and I gave her a tray. It was in the mornin' and it had an egg, all steamin' and a puffin' the way she liked them though I always says they're easier on the stomach if they bile a mite longer. It had a glass of the juice she kept after me to give her and never drank—orange juice, it was. And there was toast, near burnt the way she thought fashionable, though I been in better houses that liked theirs buttered and with a little spring to it. And there was tea, good strong tea like I always takes myself—the same that always used to steady my heart, but now never does since I left the place."

"The tea came from the cannister in the kitchen?" Eliot asked.

"The very same. The only tea in the house—why do you ask?"

"It had a slightly bitter taste?"

"Yes, and I didn't' like it none at first. But then it came on me that I breathed easier after a cup of that tea, real strong-like it was—and my heart it was steadier. I've tried to find it again, but there's none in the stores like it."

"Who had access to the tea cannister at the time?"

"Why nobody—nobody at all but me and the loony. And what would he, poor daft thing he was, know about tea?"

"We found a large quanity of digitalis mixed with the tea leaves," the Inspector said.

Mamie Parsons screamed. Her red balloon of a face did not change its taut, irascible expression, her mouth hardly opened—but the shrill sound she made was ear-splitting. "Now you'll say I done her in—me, a poor soul who's never meant nobody no harm in all her livelong life!"

Inspector Eliot spoke quickly and soothingly. "I'm sure that you didn't poison your employer, Mrs. Parsons," he said, "although you may have been the innocent instrument of the murderer. I want you to think carefully before you answer my next question. Who else besides Claude and yourself might have put the digitalis in the tea?"

"I dunno," she said dully. "I dunno." Then her eyes brightened and she looked about at me, at Maud and Shirley—and even surreptitiously at Edward and Jasper. "Unless it was one of them."

"How could it have been one of the other members of the family?" the Inspector asked. "No one entered and left the house except Claude according to what you said yourself."

"Except for once," Mamie said hesitantly. She pointed her finger melodramatically at me. "She did once—I saw her dancing in the hall one night."

The Inspector did not look at me, but I heard his voice tighten as he spoke. "Are you sure of what you're saying, Mrs. Parson. You say you saw Abigail Longstreet dancing in the hall of the house—do you mean the great hall?"

"I saw her in the great hall the last night I was in this cursed place," Mamie said looking squarely at me. "The very next day when I brought the missis her breakfast, she said I was poisonin' her and told me to leave without no

extra pay. I saw her dancin' and cavortin' and a hummin' that sinful air-la, la, la-da-tee-da!" Mamie attempted to hum the opening phrase of "Tales from the Vienna Woods."

"You're quite sure you couldn't have been mistaken?" the Inspector asked, eyeing her distrustfully. "Aah-hmn! How did you know it was Abigail Longstreet—and not someone else?"

Mamie bowled over to me and stood looking up at me. Her finger shook like a signpost in a high wind directly beneath my nose. "I could tell it was you by your red-gold hair, all shiny and pretty floating down your bare back. I knew it was you by the ball dress you had on—no dress like the girls wear today."

"You could see clearly?" the Inspector asked.

"Clear enough, though it was night and the chandelier wasn't turned on. Ella would never let us turn the chandelier on—said it wasted electricity."

"It was dark then?" I asked, my voice a whisper. Something had caught in my throat.

"There was a light from the head of the stairs where the missis stood," Mamie said. "Ella had gotten out of her bed and she had turned on the light at the stairhead. She stood there lookin' down and she said to me—'Mamie, go to your room, I'll tend to this.' "

"And did you go?" Eliot asked.

"I had to go or she wouldn't have liked it. But I stood behind the door to the kitchen—with it open a crack—and I could see and hear what happened."

"Can you tell us what happened?"

"She kept dancin' and hummin'—Abigail here, that is. The old woman spoke to her in a loud voice such as I didn't think she had the breath left for—with her so weak from not eatin' the food she said was poisoned." Mamie paused and looked around at us, pleased to have an audience.

"She said—'You can't frighten me, Albert D'Yvetot. You have no right to the name—and Claude will never acknowledge you.' And then I didn't hear nothin' else. But you, here, went on dancing as long as I stood there and watched."

Eliot turned to me, smiling ironically. "And what do you have to say to that, Miss Longstreet?"

"I'll say only what I told you when you first questioned

me," I replied. "I hadn't set foot in this house for fifteen years until I came here this afternoon."

"You think that some one impersonated you that night that Mamie describes, just as someone impersonated you at nine-nineteen this past morning?" the Inspector asked.

"No," I said, "I don't think that. I believe Mamie didn't describe accurately what she saw. I believe she saw someone impersonating Sybil."

Jasper began to chuckle nastily. "I told you Sybil did it. She'd stood enough from the Longstreets and she up and did in grandmama."

Stephen Eliot shook his head slowly. "I can't accuse a poltergeist of murder," he said seriously—"it wouldn't look good on the records."

EIGHTEEN

"MRS.PARSONS, you didn't by any chance take advantage of the fact that your employer was blind?" Inspector Eliot asked the cook in his blandest voice.

"Me take advantage of the poor dear?" Mamie Parsons exclaimed indignantly. "What ever gave you the idea?"

"I had a look at the chandelier in the great hall. It is extraordinarily dusty."

"There'd be some dust on it, perhaps. But it's no more than two months since I climbed the high stepladder and used soap and water on every bauble of it," Mamie Parsons replied.

"And what about the ceiling of the hall?" Eliot asked.

"That I haven't done—that I never did—it takes men and scaffolding. It's been a year or more since Alec and Tom were at it last."

"Aah-humn. Thank you, Mrs. Parsons. You may go home now. I trust you rest well." Stephen Eliot was no longer interested in the woman. She glanced at him, puffed out her cheeks, then rolled about and left as quickly as she had come, muttering something about getting a poor soul up in the middle of the night.

Eliot had snubbed out his cigar and his hands were empty. He sank back in the ladder-backed chair and extended his

feet, sighing deeply. His hands roved his trouser legs, plucking the cloth restlessly. "The woman has a face like a balloon. Somehow that strikes me as significant—aah-hmn!"

The Inspector stood up and walked about among us, glancing at one of us then another. Except for myself and Jasper, the assembled family had said nothing throughout Mamie's questioning—a fact that was in itself unusual. My mother, Lizbeth, was especially taciturn and Maud was as pale and tense as at any time in the past hour. I glanced at grandmama's ormolu clock and saw that it was after three in the morning.

The Inspector stopped in front of me and sighted down his long nose at my eyes. "Why should a blind woman turn on the light and *look down* at a ghost, even a poltergeist that likes to waltz?" he asked me. "And why should a garden roller be found on the second floor of a recluse's house—only later in the day to run away by itself and smash an old man to bits? And what has the cylinder of compressed air—compressed—oh, what a fool I've been! McHugh! McHugh!"

The officer, had left the room some while back, poked his head through the door. "Yes, sir?"

"McHugh, go up to the fourth floor and call off the search. And look up, you dolt, look up, when you get to the hall and before you climb the stairs. Then find some way of getting it down." Eliot was in a temper again. Officer McHugh looked vaguely at him and I could not blame the man. The Inspector's words had meant as little to me as they had to him. "Do as I say, man—I know it seems preposterous, but do as I say!" Eliot continued. "Look up—and then find some way to bring it down. And be sure to call off the search."

McHugh left the room, scratching his head in puzzlement. The Inspector returned his gaze to me. "I thought it was window dressing, but I now see it all has a part. What a damned fool I've been."

"I hope you know what you're talking about," I told him.

"It's a hell of a way to run an investigation," Jasper agreed.

As if to confirm my brother's evaluation of the proceedings, there was a sudden loud report. "My God!" the Inspector groaned, "the only way the nincompoop could think of was to shoot it down!"

Officer McHugh appeared in the doorway. "I've got it, sir. You want it in here?"

"Not yet," the Inspector shouted. "Call off the search—and have one of my other assistants fetch Oliver Derwent. Bring *him* in here."

For some reason my brother, Jasper, found a good deal to laugh about in the Inspector's irrational instructions. I felt the man had been working too hard and I was concerned for him.

A moment later another policeman led Oliver Derwent into the room. His sport jacket was crumpled and dirty as if he had rolled in the mud. I believe the Inspector had said that Oliver had been discovered beneath the bushes near the front gate.

"What were you doing here tonight?" Eliot demanded.

"I—I followed my wife," Derwent said. He was frightened and sullen.

"Did you enter the house?"

"N-no."

"You would've if you'd had the chance," the Inspector snapped. "Sit down. You may be just as guilty anyway."

Eliot turned about and once more glowered at everyone present. The long lines of his face had seemed to grow longer as the night wore on; now his features struck me as being composed entirely of vertical strokes—a caricature. But it was difficult for me to be objective. I felt as if I were on the edge of a precipice, not knowing whether I was about to be pushed off—or pulled back to safety.

"There was a point this evening," the Inspector said, "when I thought you were all guilty." He stopped and passed his hand over his slablike jaw. Edward had coughed. Maud had flinched. My mother, who had been twisting her necklace, had let her hands drop like stones into her lap. Even Shirley had stiffened and Oliver Derwent had begun to quake.

"Too many factors," the Inspector said, "too damn many factors for any one person to be responsible—or so I thought. I'll show you how wrong I was."

He pulled out his notebook, wet his thumb and smoothed down a page or two. "Let's start with motives. Aah-hmn! Well, there—and there only—the case is simple. Money. The only reason any of you would have killed Ella, and later

Claude, was to get some of the fortune that was your due. Let's tick you off.

"Maud Derwent wanted money for all the usual reasons and another too. She was in love with her mother's husband, Edward." As Eliot said this, I watched Lizbeth—but the beauty of her patrician face remained as implacable as ever. "Edward had debts—gambling debts—that might cause him serious trouble if not paid. So Maud had good reason for killing her grandmother.

"She had reason for killing Claude too—once she knew about his existence. Claude, as her mother's first husband, would have had a prior claim on Lizbeth's share of the estate if Lizbeth had died. In fact, if Claude had made his existence known—and could have proved his sanity—which may or may not have been unlikely—Edward would have had no claim on Lizbeth one way or the other.

"So Maud—and Edward—had good reason for killing both Claude and Ella. All I've said about Maud's reason for murder goes for her lover too, you see."

Edward Presscott had jumped to his feet, his fists chafing his trousers' legs, his jaw trembling with suppressed anger. "Be careful what you say. I can take so much—"

"You'll take more, Mr. Presscott," Elliot said with sarcastic reassurance. "For as I see it, you could have played a double game. Lizbeth, if I'm not mistaken, loves you. She would also have wanted to get her share of the money as quickly as possible to help you with your gambling debts, as well as for her own reasons. And she would have had a strong motive for wishing Claude dead, because his existence made her a bigamist. And no woman, least of all your beautiful wife, could look with equanimity on resuming a marital relationship with a man who had spent twenty-five years and more locked in a single room, a man who, though sometimes lucid, was capable of mad, homicidal impulses. Of course, she probably could have had Claude certified insane—but it would have been risky, there would have been scandal and it would have been so much easier to kill a man who had disappeared so many years ago. It would not have seemed safe too."

My mother's lips trembled and she managed to speak. "You can ruin my character, Inspector, but you can't make me confess to a crime I didn't commit. When I confided in you so

recently, I didn't realize you were so base, so unprincipled." She looked over her shoulder and upward. "Eddie, you should have told me about this man—that he wasn't to be trusted." As always when my mother carried on a conversation—at least she said it was a conversation—with her control, I felt chilled and wary. Lizbeth might really have done it, I could not help thinking; especially if Eddie had advised her that she could do it safely.

"Sticks and stones may break my bones," said the Inspector, smiling more freely as he became more involved in his task. "Jasper, your mother's mention of her confidence to me, when first I talked with her, brings me to your own interesting motives. Money, you've never had enough of it, have you, boy?—nor has your wife, Shirley, had enough. That was one of your motives, but then there's also the factor of your jealousy of your sister, the pleasure you take in her least discomfiture, which anyone who is near you can hardly miss.

"I suggest that if you could have murdered your grandmother in a way that would make it seem that only Abigail could have been the culprit, you would have done so. And I believe the murder of Claude might have resulted only from his becoming aware of your machinations and your fear that he would in some manner let the police know that you had done it.

"Your wife might have abetted you. Or, in her turn, she might have conceived of the plan as a way of getting the money for the marbles she needed. She had already warned you that she would divorce you, if you could not procure funds for the marbles. She might have thought of the plan to kill Ella so that you could have your inheritance sooner—and Claude would then have been a possible impediment, a surviving claimant who might take all and leave you nothing or force you to fight his case in the courts. Yes, Jasper, you and Shirley—one of you or both—could have murdered Ella and Claude."

Jasper laughed coolly and stroked his wife's forehead. Shirley was smiling confidently and brashly. "You'll have to do better than that, Inspector. A grand jury would never return an indictment on such absurd motivation."

Eliot shook his head. "You think it's absurd?" he said.

"Well, we'll see." He glanced at me. "I'm going to back up a little now and say that every person I've mentioned so far also might have killed Claude for the reason I've mentioned in connection with Jasper and Shirley. Claude was around. He could have seen things. We have no proof how inarticulate he was—or at least proof hasn't been brought out up to now." I saw Eliot wink slowly at me. I realized, although I should have known it all along, that he was still pursuing his devious methods. He had other matters up his sleeve, evidence that would shift the emphasis again, make those that seemed innocent, guilty, and those that seemed guilty, innocent. I only wished he had not dropped the wink at *me*. It was as if he took it for granted that I knew all that he did—as if I were the guilty one.

"Yes, Claude could have been the man who knew too much in any of your schemes—and any of you could have killed him for that reason. Even you, Oliver Derwent, you could have killed Claude because he knew you had killed Ella Longstreet and you were afraid he would tell the police."

Oliver walked forward in such a hurry that he skipped and sidled. He stood a few feet from the Inspector, hesitating to come nearer, and said—"I've never killed anyone. I've enough trouble as it is."

Stephen Eliot nodded his head and his eyes gleamed with an emotion that could have been taken for sympathy. "I know you have trouble, Oliver. Your wife is running around with another man. You would do anything to get her back. Like Jasper you must have felt more than once that if only she had enough money she would forget Edward Presscott and be faithful. Perhaps you see how wrong your reasoning is now —but you could have thought so then. And you could have murdered Ella so that Maud could have inherited the money she wanted. Was that what happened?"

Oliver's shoulders slumped and for a moment I thought he would collapse. Then he grew rigid and his eyes found the Inspector's eyes and faced their blunt gaze. "You know that isn't true," he said. "You know I did no such thing."

The Inspector stood up and paced back and forth. "I've only shown you that you all thought you had motives. Two murders have been committed and the victims are just as dead as if you all had really had motives."

"I don't understand," Shirley said. "Are you admitting that you don't believe in what you've said, yourself?"

The Inspector shook his head. "I'm only saying that, although each of you thought he stood to gain by murdering Ella and Claude—whether he did so or not—none of you actually did. Only two people, one of whom is in this room and one of whom will be here presently, had true motives for either murder. But I'm also saying that any of you, alone or in combination with another, might have murdered once, murdered twice, under the illusion that you did have a real motive."

"You'll have to explain all that." Edward Presscott said. "Or I'll think you're playing with words."

"In time," said Eliot, "—in good time."

"If none of us had motives," said Maud, her voice hoarse and tense, "who are the mysterious two who did? And what are their motives? And are they the murderers?"

Deputy Chief Inspector Stephen Eliot had been glancing towards the door throughout the past ten minutes. I saw him move forward, his face relaxing. I looked at the door too and I saw Arthur Crump standing on the threshold, a strange, middle-aged woman on his arm.

"Arthur?" I said. "Where have you been?"

"Madame Biencolil!" Lizbeth breathed, stretching out her arms. "How good of you to come. Eddie and I need you desperately."

Inspector Eliot gravely shook his head. "Not Arthur Crump. Not Madame Biencolil. Albert D'Yvetot, Claude's illegitimate son, and his mother, Suzy, Claude's erstwhile mistress."

NINETEEN

"YOU!" I SAID, confronting Arthur Crump with all the dignity I could assume—"you kissed me! And if what he says is true,"—I pointed to Inspector Eliot who was watching me with amusement and interest—"why, then you're my half-brother. You beast! Oh, you loathsome beast!"

Arthur's face became contorted with an emotion I took for shame and as he saw the tears spring into my eyes he made a

movement to come to me. His arms rose as though he wished to embrace me. But he did not come to my side—he did not embrace me. The small woman with the wise and pretty face who stood beside him had held up her hand in a commanding gesture and he had obeyed her unspoken order.

"Doucement, ma petite," Suzy Biencolil said softly, her dark, quiet eyes compassionately regarding me. "It is not as black as you think, *cherie.* It is only a seeming-so."

She began to walk slowly into the room, her movements graceful and composed. Her son walked by her side, his eyes anxiously on me. Inspector Eliot stood and gave her his seat in my grandmama's ladder-backed chair.

I was puzzled and taken aback by the woman's words, enough so that I did not say what I might. It is my practice, when I am uncertain of my convictions, to hold my silence until I know more—and this was especially true at this moment. The events of the preceding day, and of the early morning hours of the new one, had provided one shock after another to my sensibilities, my belief in the family and its tradition, even to my idea of myself.

"Arthur Crump has a strange story to tell," the Inspector said, his voice thoughtful and sober, "and I think we'll all get to the bottom of this affair the more quickly, if I let him tell his story in his own words. I do have just this to say, though. I had seen Arthur before yesterday afternoon and the police had been carrying on a partial investigation of the matter as long ago as last month. Hindsight shows me that our casual investigation should have been an intensive one, but neither Arthur Crump nor myself could have foretold that at the time. We did not know enough about what was going on."

"You've lied to me," I said to Eliot; "you've lied to me consistently. I can see that Arthur Crump's visit to me yesterday was only a trap—a way of worming himself into my confidence so that he could report on my actions to you."

"Not a trap, Miss Longstreet—I prefer to call it an expedient." Stephen Eliot was being his most mannerly self and, I felt, his most treacherous. "And if I've lied to you," he went on, smiling expansively, "so have you lied to me—consistently."

Arthur cleared his throat and flushed. "I think Abigail should know more about what has happened before she con-

demns us," he said. "I'll admit that more than once yesterday afternoon and evening I wanted to tell her all I knew."

"I can remember one time when you pressed me with being dishonest," I said, recalling the scene in the kitchen and his, as well as my own, ambiguous remarks. "You are a wretch."

Arthur blinked at me and his face turned a deeeper color. Curiously enough, even as I excoriated him, I was impressed with his sincerity. I did not understand how that could be, but I had to admit that it was so. I found myself wondering if, after all, the deception he had played on me did not have an honorable explanation. Perhaps I should say that I found myself *wishing* that was the fact.

He was having difficulty beginning. He looked about him at the Inspector and at his mother, then his eyes returned to me. I thought at last he was going to speak, but then there was an interruption.

A man I had not seen before, dressed in ordinary clothes but obviously a detective, walked in the door. He carried a coil of rope with a long hook fastened at its end. The Inspector went to him, saying—"You found it? Good. I knew it must be somewhere." Then they held a conversation, quiet enough to be inaudible to those of us farther into the room. Arthur waited until the Inspector returned carrying the coil of rope with its hook and, finally, dropping it on the floor.

Everyone's eyes were on the rope, yet so far as I could see no one's expression changed. The way the Inspector had dropped it on the floor had been dramatic, as though he were giving a sign to the murderer among us. But the killer, if he recognized Eliot's gesture for what it was perhaps meant to be, gave no sign in return.

"You may continue, Mr. Crump," Stephen Eliot said suavely. "This interesting bit of evidence, the last piece in the jigsaw puzzle—can wait until you have finished."

Arthur swallowed several times and wet his lips. "I guess —I suppose I'd better begin at the beginning," he said in a dry, hesitant voice. His look kept returning to me; it had now happened so often that I felt obliged to avert my eyes.

"As the Inspector said, I'm—in a way—a member of the family. My father was Claude Bryant—my mother is Suzy Biencolil." His hand gave a flutter in his mother's direction. "My mother met my father in France, after the last war. He

had been in prison in Germany and he was—well, he was what they called shell-shocked in those days. Nowadays we'd say he was a psycho."

The small woman at his side frowned and Arthur reflected her displeasure on his own face. I wondered if he was afraid of his mother, or if he were only being particularly sensitive to her feelings at this difficult time.

"I'm going to have to tell this my way," he said with determination, "even if it causes some of those present pain." I expected him to look at his mother as he said this, and consequently I had left my own glance unguarded. Instead, his eyes found my own again and stayed on them so long that—so kindly that—I could only call his a lover's look.

It was myself, as much as his mother, that he was going to hurt!

"The man you call your father," Arthur began again, "knew that he was sick. He had been in a hospital for a long time and the doctors had finally let him leave after he had undergone a delicate brain operation and a convalescence of many months. One of my earliest memories of him is of his flying into a rage because his *potage* was not warm enough for his liking. He broke every dish in the house that time and blacked my mother's eye. I remember the scene as a terrible one—the fight of two monsters who towered above me. I must not have been very old.

"But I don't remember my father as always having been a monster. I have other memories. I recall sitting on his lap and poking at his eyes—saying *'les yeux'* in my childish way as I did so. I think we must have had a game. I would point to his mouth and say *la bouche*—to his ear and say *l'oreille* and so on. As you can see I learned French before I knew English. I didn't come to America for many years."

Arthur reached into his pocket for a cigarette with fumbling fingers. I wanted to reassure him, to tell him that it was all right—but I did not know how I could honestly do so. I did know I felt for that little boy and envied the memory of his father which I did not have.

"Then I remember days when my mother wept and I tried to comfort her," Arthur said, the cigarette drooping from his lips and its furl of smoke veiling his eyes. For once I felt the way a man smoked a cigarette was attractive, although

I had seen my brother let his cigarette dangle like that many times and had felt only revulsion. Something was happening to me that I did not understand.

"But my mother would not be consoled," he said, "and after a while I knew it was because my father didn't come home from the café any more, a song on his lips and the smell of wine on his breath. My mother wept because my father didn't hunch over his drawing board any more, drawing funny little pictures that he sold to the newspapers. He had gone away.

"I remember growing up feeling an emptiness whenever I thought of my father. When I'd ask my mother about him, she wouldn't answer me—but would show me a silhouette that a sidewalk artist had cut of his head and shoulders when they first knew each other. I've always kept that silhouette. I have it right here."

Arthur took his wallet out of his pocket and from it withdrew two squares of cardboard. He slipped the cardboards apart and lifted out a wisp of tissue paper. His fingers then delicately pinched up the silhouette itself, snipped from black paper. He handed it to me, saying, *"C'est mon père."*

If I had doubted what he was saying when he began to talk, I could not doubt it now. The silhouette was unmistakably that of Claude. I had seen a few old snapshots Lizbeth had of her husband and I recognized at once the high forehead, the small nose, the slight chin and the apologetic way he had held his head. I looked at Lizbeth, thinking to hand the scrap of black paper to her. I saw a look in her eyes that frightened me. Her face was pale and glistening with its own damp, her eyes were glazed and fitfully glimmering. I thought for a moment I had seen her dead. But she spoke. "You are an impostor," she said to Arthur.

Arthur only turned away from her and took back the silhouette that I handed to him. He placed it as carefully as before beneath the tissue and between the cardboard squares and inserted it in a compartment of his wallet.

"I am not the impostor," he said with grave determination. "I grew up thinking of myself as a child without a father. I respected my mother's silences and I didn't insist on knowing what was my due as I should have—if I had, I might have been in time to prevent a tragedy.

"My mother had the gift of foretelling the future. As I grew

older and became a pupil at the *lycée,* Madame Suzy's clientele grew until it included a cabinet minister, two or three industrialists, a general and many, many millionaires. But my mother knew what was coming—it was her gift—and though she warned her clients of the debacle approaching, only a few beside herself heeded her prophecy. My mother and I came to this country in nineteen thirty-eight, the year of Mr. Chamberlain and the umbrella that could not stave off the flood.

"I attended one of the metropolitan universities where I learned to be a journalist and to speak and write your rich and racy idiom. By the time America was involved in the war, I had an editorial job with *The Manhattanite* and was earning a good living. My mother found that her gift for prediction was as valued in New York as in Paris. She established a salon in an apartment on Park Avenue to which came senators and judges, publishers and Broadway producers, Hollywood writers and their women. It was there that I met you, Mrs. Presscott." He bowed to my mother, who had not taken her hate-glazed eyes from him while he had talked. "I saw this afternoon that you didn't remember me. But you have come to depend upon *ma petite maman.* And Madame Suzy and her son have come to know you and your family very well indeed."

"You are nothing but a spy," my mother said, hissing the last word. She glanced over her shoulder in the gesture that now had sickening import for me. "Isn't it so, Eddie? Is he anything but a spy and an impostor?"

Eddie, of course, did not speak. There was complete silence in the room. Presscott had bent forward, as if unwilling to lose a word. Maud was breathing heavily, but making no sound. Shirley's eyes glittered with curiosity and Jasper's permanent smirk had lapsed into a look of imbecile amazement. Arthur had the family where he wanted them.

"In the early nineteen-forties I went away to war as did most of my generation," Arthur continued, "and I didn't return until nineteen forty-six. My old job on the magazine was waiting for me and I was given a chance to do some of the profiles that *The Manhattanite* features from time to time. Some of the pieces I did were quite successful and it got so that I was expected to turn one out every few months.

"If you've ever had the job of writing the kind of topical biography that these profiles are, you know that it takes a particular kind of personality to serve as the basis for one. The average famous person lacks the color, the variety of things done, the interesting aspects, to sustain so long an article —and many of those who do have those qualities have other facets to their personalities that make them unlikely as subjects. The result was that I found it increasingly difficult to write the profiles that were expected of me.

"You'll pardon me for talking shop, but all this has a point in what I have to say. I ought to tell you also that I had always heard my father referred to as Claude Bryant—and I didn't know that he had been married before he knew my mother or that his first wife was Lizbeth Longstreet. I had taken the writing-name of Arthur Crump myself, because I felt Albert D'Yvetot too Gallic for the American taste. My mother had told me long ago that she and my father had chosen the name of D'Yvetot for me as a romantic fantasy. In France, I had been vain enough to cherish the *de,* even though I knew it to have no family tradition behind it. I don't think my own mother knew until recently the history of Sybil D'Yvetot or why my father had suggested exactly that name for his bastard son.

"A few months ago I was searching for a subject that I might build a profile around, when I thought of Ella Maybelle Longstreet, the recluse of Fifth Avenue. Everyone knew the gossip about how this wealthy old woman, of one of America's first families, had shut herself up in her mansion a number of years back and had since had no contact with the outside world. I didn't know whether a decent piece could be written about Ella Longstreet, but somehow the idea took hold in my mind and grew. The research difficulties were tremendous, there was the task of procuring her permission and I could think of any number of reasons why, once having thought of it, I should have abandoned the notion. The point is I didn't give it up—but I didn't do much about writing it either. It had become the kind of pet project that all writers fancy most—the piece that I was going to do someday when I had the time."

Although Arthur had been talking a long time without interruption, no one had moved or in any way given an indi-

cation of wandering attention. I do not know how the others felt, but I had the sensation of nearing the end, as though the strange circumstances since yesterday afternoon had a definite form and a definite cadence. As Arthur talked on, my pulse quickened and I felt more alive, more restless. And yet had I been able to stir from my chair, I should have left the room. For I also dreaded the disclosure I knew he would soon make—and I should rather have been ignorant of it.

Arthur's face had become abstracted as he talked. He seemed no longer to be thinking of the effects his words were having on the Inspector, myself or the others in the room. He was living in the time when he had been planning the article —he was remembering how he had been then. And I saw a curious thing. He appeared to grow shyer, more withdrawn and less confident. It was as if the action he had taken, the course that had brought him to this room, had changed him into a more energetic, responsible man.

"One night I happened to mention my plans for the article about Ella Longstreet to my mother. Sometimes it seems to me that it was just by chance that I told her about my projected piece. But this isn't so—sooner or later I would have told her. One way or another *maman* always knows about her son." He glanced at the small woman and smiled slightly, tenderly. "I am certain I recall her exact words after I told her," he went on. "Mother looked at me and said, 'You mean to do this, my son? It is a serious matter?' When I had told her that it was, she in turn related to me the facts I had never before known about my father."

Suzy Biencolil held up one finger of her hand and her son, seeing the tiny gesture, deferred to his mother. The woman's body was slight, though beautifully and inconspicuously attired, and her features were perfect miniatures; as I looked at her I thought of an enamel portrait on an eighteenth century locket come to life. Consequently, when she spoke I was not prepared for her big, vibrant voice. It filled the room with mystery, as if an oracle were proclaiming.

"Mine is not an honored profession," she said, "although the world accepts it. I have had the gift of knowing what others think and desire since childhood. It is not a supernatural power; I think of it as insight of a kind that in other, more skilled, hands than mine could be used to heal. But I

have kept the faith, in my way, and until now I have never revealed the secrets of others, not even those I thought horrible, except once in the bosom of my family. What I am about to do I do not take lightly."

She spoke with the precision and yet errant emphasis of one who has learned to speak English without accent. As she had talked, the throb in her voice had increased until it was a vibrato—and then a shudder. I felt that she was in holy awe of being about to commit what was to her a kind of sacrilege.

"I do not believe I would have used my gift publicly, and for pay, if many years ago I had not found myself in the predicament of the mother with child who has been abandoned. I knew the risk I had taken when I allowed myself to love Claude Bryant, and later when I gave him his child. I knew he was a man sick with the melancholy of the world—a man of mad impulse who might kill me or leave me.

"After his disappearance I knew where he had gone. He had told me of his wife in America and his connection with a great family. I was not a silly girl, heedless of the chance I took. But I loved Claude and I knew that there was no good for him in his wife, his American child, the mother-in-law and her pride which he despised. Yet when he had gone, I knew where I had to go to find him."

She sighed and glanced at her son, then shut her eyes and continued, "I did not go. I used my gift to earn the living my son and I required. Had Claude returned, he would have been able to take again his place as his son's father, as my beloved. But I, too, had pride.

"The time came when France was no longer safe and my son and I journeyed to your shores and set about to be citizens of the United States. I vowed to myself that I would not tell my boy about his father or his family. I knew that someday he would find out—you may laugh, but I could foretell it. The day, though, I knew was not at hand. I compromised with the future and prayed that for once my gift had failed.

"Then late last winter my son told me of the article he planned to write and I knew that the day approached. I told him about his father, about the Longstreets and their wealth, their pride. I told him more."

Suzy Biencolil slowly turned her head until she was regarding Lizbeth. My mother, who had continued to stare at her for many minutes, dropped her eyes and her hand crept to her throat. "I had come to know much more about the Longstreets than I had ever wished for," the small woman went on. "Mrs. Presscott had begun to attend my seances frequently. At first, she was only one of many guests—later, she had insisted on private sittings. I did my best to discourage her. I asked exorbitant rates. I did not keep appointments. More than once I insulted her. But it was little use, as again I had known. She was fated to come to me as I was fated to know her story."

Inspector Eliot had been listening with equanimity, his eyes hooded, his posture that of a man who was content to let others take over for an interval. He came to life, sitting up straight and glancing piercingly at Madame Biencolil. "I want to be clear about this," he said, "so I know whether it can be accepted as evidence or not. Did Lizbeth Presscott tell you those things you are about to relate to us? Or did you surmisé them by means of your 'gift'?" The Inspector's tone was not ironic. He meant his questions as honest requests for facts.

Suzy Biencolil smiled, her clear green eyes dancing with merry fires. "You want me to give you what you Americans call 'the trade secrets,' Inspector. Again I tell you that it is a thing I have never, never done before. But this time I shall break my rule.

"When someone visits a clairvoyant, he does not want to hear the truth—nor is he ready to tell the truth. He wants to have his hopes confirmed and his fears denied. The clairvoyant must do what a good detective does, Inspector Eliot. She must listen to all that she is told, deduce from that the truth. Then if she is clever, she can tell her client what he wants to know. *Comprenez vous?*"

Eliot nodded his head. "In other words, you inferred the truth about the Longstreet question from Lizbeth Presscott's lies?"

My mother stirred in her chair. She seemed in a dream-like state. "That woman is evil," she said, half-moaning. "That woman is a devil."

Suzy Biencolil winced and Arthur clenched his fists. I

looked at Edward and I saw that he was behaving strangely. He appeared to want to disassociate himself from his wife. He kept his eyes averted and he had moved as far away from her as he could, leaving his chair to stand near Oliver near the fireplace. I became aware of the ormolu clock ticking on the mantelpiece. As I listened its tick slowed, then stopped. Time, itself, had frozen.

"And what did you learn from Lizbeth?" Stephen Eliot asked Suzy Biencolil.

"The first time she visited me, she was very frightened. She told me that she had been seeing a spiritualist who had died. The spiritualist had told her she had a control named Eddie. Mrs. Presscott said Eddie was a British boy, a fighter pilot who had died in the war.

"The controls—they are a device I never use. But Mrs. Presscott insisted that she wanted to talk with Eddie." Suzy spread her tiny hands, lay them flat in her lap. "What could I do? I am not a ventriloquist, but I let her talk with Eddie."

"And she asked Eddie questions? Can you remember what they were?"

"She asked Eddie if he could 'contact' Claude Bryant. When I heard this question, I became alert. It might not be the same Claude Bryant—how could it be?—but even so, I pretended that Eddie was having difficulty reaching Claude because, I tell you frankly, Inspector, I was not sure what I should have Eddie say for this Claude.

"Then Mrs. Presscott, as my clients always do, saved the day for me. She said, 'Eddie, are you sure Claude is dead? Mama said Claude was dead, but later she told me he was only sick and that he would never be well, that he was as good as dead. Tell me, Eddie, is Claude dead?" She was still very frightened.

"Then I knew what to say to her. I had Eddie get in touch with Claude and tell her that he was dead but that he was in a beautiful land where no one had any troubles. I told her that he had died an easy death with no pain and that she was not to worry."

Lizbeth stirred fitfully, as if coming up from a deep sleep. "The woman is a fraud, an impostor."

Jasper chuckled and the slight noise set off an hysterical giggle from Oliver.

"Then she asked Eddie a difficult question," Suzy Biencolil continued. "She asked him when Claude had died, if he was dead. She said, 'Eddie, I think I saw him in the Park yesterday. He was shuffling along and his feet were bare.' "

I gasped and tears started into my eyes. I began to understand what was happening. It was as if a cold hand had closed upon my throat.

"How did you answer her question?" the Inspector asked.

Suzy Biencolil again gave him a swift smile. "I made a mistake. I knew better than to say exactly, but I thought I was fortunate that the month was February, near the beginning of the year. I had Eddie say that Claude had died the previous year.

" 'You must be wrong!' Mrs. Prescott had cried loudly and bitterly. " 'He died in nineteen twenty-four. Mama told me so!' "

"And how did you get out of that?" the Inspector asked.

"We have our ways, *monsieur*. I told her that Eddie had faded, that the contact had been broken. I reassured her that when the contact is weakening, errors creep in. And the next time she called, when she asked that question, I told her her husband had died in nineteen twenty-four."

"Can you tell me more briefly what else you learned from your sessions with Mrs. Presscott?" the Inspector asked.

"You trust my method now, Inspector?" Suzy asked.

"It's not unlike my own," Eliot replied grudgingly.

Madame Biencolil nodded her head. "I shall tell you then quickly the terrible facts I learned. Mrs. Presscott is a sick woman. She has visions such as clairvoyants only pretend to have—and she hears voices that are not there. She is guilty because she thinks that her husband—my Claude—had been confined by her mother against his will.

"I could not get a clear account, but Ella Longstreet must have drugged Claude the night he returned to his home. He apparently behaved very badly—he might have been out of his mind. I could always make him do as I wanted by showing him I did not fear him, that I loved him whatever he did. Much of Claude's violence was like the tantrum of a spoiled child, Inspector.

"But these women, Lizbeth was present that night, were terrified. The mother put sleeping medicine in his drink and

locked him in his room when he fell asleep. She sent her daughter away the next day on a long trip—and when she came back Lizbeth found her husband was confined in a barred cell high in the house.

"Why had Ella Longstreet done this? I have tried to decide and I think her pride had warped her. She feared disgrace above everything and was convinced that to have Claude confined in a hospital where he might have become well would have meant public scorn.

"Lizbeth found it easy to forget her husband. The times, the nineteen twenties, were a period of unrestraint when young people flew in convention's face. Lizbeth went to many parties and she was loved by many men. And Lizbeth got into trouble, not once, but twice. Two children were born to her and to keep her mother from knowing what had happened, when her pregnancies became apparent she told Ella that she had slipped into Claude's room by way of the dumbwaiter. The first time the old lady was angry, but she forgave her. The second time she had carpenters come in and seal the dumbwaiter. From that time on no one had heard or seen Claude again—and in nineteen twenty-four Ella had said he had died. Later, when Lizbeth had told her of her intention of marrying Edward Presscott, her mother took her aside and said it would be bigamy. She said that Claude still lived. But Lizbeth had not believed her and had married Edward despite her protest. That was in the nineteen thirties and from that day Ella Longstreet would not permit her daughter in the house. A few years after that, the old lady became a recluse."

Suzy looked at me, not smiling, her eyes sympathetic. "That is what I told my son the night I knew he would eventually discover for himself about the Longstreets. I told him one other thing. I told him that Mrs. Prescott the day before had come to me with a question that made my blood run cold. It is a strange fact, Inspector, that she should have asked so revealing a question. I considered telling the police. But then I decided she was being hysterical."

"What was that question?" Stephen Eliot asked.

Suzy Biencolil paused and in the silence that followed there was the sensation of a common apprehension, a common dread of knowing . . . all.

"She wanted me to ask Eddie," the small woman said in her apocalyptical voice, "to tell Claude that she needed his help in murdering Ella."

My mother screamed and fell over in a faint.

TWENTY

"HOW DOES IT FEEL, Abigail, to have been born on the wrong side of the blanket?" In the confusion that had followed my mother's collapse, Jasper had seen his chance to approach me and whisper his snide question in my ear. I wanted to slap his face, but I knew that would have given him the satisfaction of having created a scene. My brother would have been willing to be burnt at the stake, if I might have been burnt at his side so that he could watch my torment.

Shirley had been nearest Lizbeth when she fell and she and Oliver had helped my mother to a divan in the front of the long drawing room where they were busily chafing her wrists and administering brandy. Inspector Eliot had returned to his chair and he was obviously waiting for Suzy Biencolil to continue her interrupted account. But it was Arthur Crump —or should I now have thought of him as Albert D'Yvetot? —who began to speak. I realized as I heard his voice that it had been relief, instead of shock, that I had felt at his mother's revelation. I was not so much concerned at discovering the fact of my illegitimacy, as reassured to know that Arthur Crump was not my half-brother. The memory of that kiss, which had not been final, lingered with sweet warmth upon my lips.

"There isn't much to add to what my mother has said," Arthur began almost apologetically, "except to say that after she had told me about my father and the Longstreets I set about watching the house and grounds. Mother believed that Claude was still alive. I doubted it, but a part of me had to know one way or the other. I had never had a father and I wanted to discover my own, no matter what his mental condition—if he still lived."

Arthur looked at the Inspector and myself. "You remember I told you that I had seen an old man puttering about the grounds once or twice when passing the house? That old man

was my father. I would see him in the evening and in the early morning, walking about aimlessly in his bare feet. Sometimes I would see him carrying something—then he would scurry as if afraid to be seen.

"I saw him more than once or twice; I saw him many times. I decided from close observation of his actions that he must leave the grounds on occasion, because of the objects I saw him carrying around and often burying or hiding beneath bushes or under stones. I talked to my mother about my theory and she suggested that we go to the police. But the desk sergeant at the precinct listened to what I had to say and asked if I had any evidence. When I told him that I did not, and added that I had not seen my father since I was two, he told me there was nothing the police could do. He warned me that the Longstreets were fine, respectable people, and told me that if he saw me loitering near the house he would have to arrest me for disorderly conduct. I left the station-house with a low opinion of American democracy."

Inspector Eliot tugged at his ear. "You should have had evidence, son," he said. "In America the sanctity of a man's home can't be violated unless there's evidence he has been doing something criminal."

Arthur shook his head. "I guess you're right. Anyway, the desk sergeant's warning didn't keep me from loitering. I kept watch on the house day and night, sleeping on a park bench across the street. That's how I came to be aware of the fact that the house had visitors most nights—a man and a woman."

A sigh was heard in the room. I glanced at Jasper and Maud, only to find that they were looking at me—and at each other.

"Aah-hmn!" the Inspector announced. "And do you see either that man or that woman in this room?" he asked.

Arthur shook his head dejectedly. "I was never close enough to see their faces. I had to do most of my watching from the Park across the avenue. If I walked about the house or stood on the sidewalk, Officer McHugh when he made his rounds would chase me away. Most of the time I was concealed in the upper branches of the elm that grows near the Park wall. From there I could tell that the visitors were

a man and a woman, that they aways came between twelve and one o'clock a night and stayed for a quarter of an hour or a few minutes longer—and that the woman wore a ball dress of silver and had hair of a lovely red-gold color."

"You never saw either of them at close hand?" the Inspector asked again.

"Only once—and then only her. That was the night that I sneaked into the grounds and peered through a window. I saw her waltzing in the great hall, a dim light outlining her —as if it came from the head of the stairs. And then I heard the faint tinkling of the music box. I stayed at the window only a moment—then bolted. I'm not superstiious, but I was sure I'd seen a ghost.

"I always said it was the poltergeist," Jasper snorted.

The Inspector's level gaze was turned upon me. I met it, as best I could, with a look I hoped was equally frank.

"That's about all," Arthur said. "I finally succeeded in meeting my father in the street. He was lugging a cylinder of air along, having a difficult time of it. I guess he swiped it somewhere. I helped him carry it into the grounds, but he didn't recognize me. He kept mumbling gibberish to himself."

"You hadn't told me that he was carrying a cylinder of air the night you met him!" Eliot said tensely. "Was it the same cylinder that was found in the grape arbor?"

"It could have been," Arthur said. "But I didn't see him bury it."

"You probably didn't see him bury it because he didn't bury it until later—much later. Incidentally, the footprints in the mud must have matched Claude's feet—they don't match anyone else's. But we'll never know because the body's feet were too crushed to take an accurate impression." Eliot passed his hand slowly over his chin, as if trying to decide whether to say something else. "And it was a cylinder of helium—not air. Claude probably stole it from one of the balloon vendors in the Park—and the murderer, finding it in the grounds, put it to his own uses."

"You know the rest," Arthur said. "Mother and I came to you with our story. One of mother's clients is the Commissioner and when mother told him she had a matter she wanted investigated, he recommended Deputy Chief Inspector Eliot."

"That I didn't know," Eliot said, basking in the compliment. "A sound man, the Commissioner. A little stiff in his ways, perhaps, but—"

"The Commissioner said that you had a talent for dealing with eccentrics, being one yourself," Arthur added. "And you were very kind to us—"

"Aah-hmn!" said the Inspector.

"—but we weren't getting any place," Arthur went on. "One police officer, even if he was of the caliber of Officer McHugh, was hardly enough to keep a watch on so large a house. Abigail and I proved that to ourselves—"

"You didn't do anything of the sort," said the Inspector gruffly, his vanity wounded now and his temper bearish. "I watched your preposterous charade tonight as did my full staff of assistants. "Aah-hmn! We wanted to let as many of you into the house as possible so—"

"—so the murderer could kill my poor father," said Arthur. "Well, you succeeded. But there wouldn't have been an investigation of even the most casual sort, if I hadn't written those letters."

"I'm glad you've decided to confess, son," said the Inspector.

"*You* wrote those letters!" I cried. "But they were near perfect examples of grandmama's hand. You mean that you weren't hit on the head by the note crumpled around the ring. *But where did you get grandmama's wedding ring?"*

"Yes, Mr. Crump, that is an interesting question. Where did you get Ella Longstreet's wedding ring—*if not off the body?"* the Inspector asked.

Arthur Crump smiled and did an outrageous thing. He winked at me. "A plain gold band can be bought at any jeweller's. I had no difficulty purchasing one. Considering the year of Ella Longstreet's marriage, it was certain from the customs of the times that she wore a simple gold band. My mother had learned the name of Ella's husband—long since dead—from Lizbeth during a seance. The only risk I took was the size of the ring, but I had always heard that Ella was a small woman so I took my mother's finger size."

I hardly trusted myself to speak, I was torn by such a maelstrom of emotions. I could not believe that Arthur had killed my grandmother—and his own father—but yet? "How

did you know the date of grandmama's wedding?" I asked.

"That took some digging," Arthur said assuredly. "I spent several days at the courthouse, before I found a copy of the marriage license—then, of course, I had the date."

"And you chose to fake the ring—and the letters—to get an intensive investigation?" Eliot asked.

Arthur's face and manner had grown entirely serious. "Understand me, Inspector Eliot—and Abigail Longstreet—I had no doubts that a tragedy was in the making within the walls of that house. As a private individual, hemmed in rather than aided by the lackadaisical official investigation, I could do nothing. But by forging letters from Ella Longstreet to everyone concerned—the members of the family, the police, and even the brief note which I crumpled about the ring and brought to Abigail—I could implicate all those I knew might have reasons to interfere in the lives of Ella and Claude and I could force you, Inspector Eliot, to take action."

"But there is one thing you did that seems impossible," I said. "How did you forge those letters successfully? I thought my grandmama's handwriting was distinctive and inimitable."

"That was a bit of luck," Arthur said. "As I've sometimes thought it luck that I talked to mother about my plan to write a profile about Ella—although really it wasn't, since I usually tell my mother about most of my preoccupations—so it's a good thing I once wrote to Ella and received a reply in her own hand."

"You wrote to grandmama?" I gasped. "What infernal cheek!"

"When was this?" Eliot asked roughly.

"Not so fast," said Arthur. "It was long enough ago that the date doesn't really matter—"

"Let me decide that," Eliot said.

"It was the first day or so that I had thought of doing the profile—that would be early in February. I know from experience that even the most seemingly unapproachable person will respond to a politely-phrased personal letter. So I wrote the famous recluse—and I received a prompt, a lengthy, a negative reply. It was in her handwriting. It contained enough of her writing style to allow me to imitate it. And the words had all the letters in the alphabet."

"You used that as your model?" Eliot said. "You did the forgery yourself?"

Arthur blushed and stammered when he spoke. "Oh no, I took it to a friend of mine who used to forge identity cards and passports in the Resistance. It was simple enough for him."

"But she was blind," Eliot objected. "She couldn't have read your letter."

"You forget this was in February. Some of the servants were still in the house. One of them must have read it to her. And since she became blind late in life, she could write an answer."

"Where did you get the keys you sent with the letters?" the Inspector asked.

"That was easier than you would think. The only time I succeeded in evading Officer McHugh and sneaking into the grounds at night, I found a window open on the first floor and entered the house through it. I stayed in the house only a few minutes, not enough time to explore it, because I was rattled. I'd never been a burglar before. But I found the keys hanging on hooks in the kitchen. I stole them and had duplicates made. The gate and door keys were the only ones for Yale locks."

"I see," said the Inspector. "And what about the wig?"

"I bought that at a Times Square store that does theatrical costumes. I matched it to my memory of the red-gold hair of the woman I had seen visiting the house. I had a hunch that she was deeply involved, if not the culprit in whatever was going on—and I wanted to make sure she was implicated, in case she wasn't one of the family. I even bought a dress—felt very silly in it—at the costumers. I made sure it was the style of dress that a woman who wore a ball gown such as I had seen would have worn in the daytime. Then I put it on and scurried in and out between nine-nineteen and nine-twenty-four—just before Lizbeth was due at the house yesterday morning."

"You beast!" I cried. "You transvestite!"

Arthur ignored my outburst, although he did smile vaguely—a fact that made me angrier. Inspector Eliot also did not seem to have heard my exclamations. The two men were

engrossed in the intricate and subtle game they were playing with each other.

"And now you will please tell me what you saw when you entered the house at nine-fifteen," the Inspector said.

"When I shut the door it closed with a banging sound," Arthur said. He spoke slowly, but not hesitantly; his words were sure and final. "I heard at once a feeble cry from the back of the hall. I went towards the cry, which was repeated several times, and entered this same room in which we now sit.

"It was dark and at first I thought no one was in it. Then I made out a frightfully emaciated old woman sitting in the chair you occupy. She did not sit, she had collapsed in the chair. Her head lolled, her skin was grey as dust, her eyes protruded. She seemed to be dying. But her hand, a few poor old bones, was raised weakly and one finger beckoned. She wanted me to come to her side.

"I had to kneel to catch her words. The cries she had made so short a while before had apparently exhausted her last strength. I bent my head and I heard her say—'Albert D'Yvetot, you have won. I shall change my will . . . as soon as possible. Now . . . please . . . I beg of you . . . a cup of tea."

"As I stood there—all this had taken hardly a minute—I realized that she was starving. I ran into the hall and to the first door I came to—it was the kitchen. An empty pot was set upon the stove as if awaiting me and my hands found the tea canister at once. I put water in the pot and lighted the stove—then I ran back to the room where I found the old lady. Her head that she had held feebly erect lolled. Her pulse was gone. She was dead. I had waited too long. She had died before I could help her."

Arthur Crump looked at Eliot and me, the corner of his mouth quivering, his eyes unsteady. I felt that I knew his pain and I should have liked to hold him in my arms, to tell him that I believed him.

"What did you do then?" Eliot asked.

"I ran out of the house, in my haste forgetting the wig."

"Why did you do that?"

"I was afraid. It had been a shock to hear her call me by my name, the same name my father had given me. I knew

she was blind. I didn't see how she could have known. Then I thought someone was framing me. In a few minutes Lizbeth would arrive, find her mother dead and call the police. I, who had only discovered the body, would have been accused of Ella's murder. If for no other reason, you would have suspected me when you found out about those letters. I was in a panic. What I don't understand is how your man failed to notice that I had left my wig in the house. You would think that when he had seen my haircut he would have known I was a man masquerading as a woman."

"Policemen make mistakes—and so do murderers," said Inspector Eliot. "You have just made yours."

"You don't believe I killed her?" Arthur Crump asked. His tone was incredulous. "But I've told you all this before! You accepted it then—why disbelieve me now?"

Eliot shook his head. "When you told me your story yesterday morning on the telephone, before calling Abigail Longstreet, I didn't say that I knew you lied. I said nothing. You wanted to believe that I accepted your story—and you did."

Arthur remained calm. I wanted to believe him innocent. I wanted to believe him, badly. But—

"How could I have done it, Inspector?" Arthur asked. "What about the timing—and the circle of footprints?"

"Let's begin with motive," said Stephen Eliot, the golden flecks in his eyes swirling. You had a double motive, one of the two motives that were based on reality. You wanted revenge on Ella Longstreet for her long incarceration of your father—and you wanted to control the family's wealth, which you reasoned rightfully belonged at least in part to you.

"You had met Abigail Longstreet and had courted her. She had told you about the living trust her grandmother had established. You made up your mind to marry her, to gain control of the wealth that she alone had rights to in her lifetime."

Jasper had turned and was staring at me malevolently. Edward's look was similarly hostile. Maud was as stoical as before, but her eyes glinted with malice. It was the first any of the other members of the family knew that, even with grandmama dead, they would not inherit, or so I thought.

But what Inspector Eliot was saying was vicious nonsense!

I had never seen Arthur in my life until the previous morning when Danvers had shown him into my sitting room.

"Abigail was to think that her grandmama had died a natural death. It would have been better, Arthur Crump, once you had frightened the old lady into leaving her fortune in an irrevocable trust for her daughter's benefit, if you had given up your idea of revenge. But you have a little of your father's impulsiveness. You had to kill Ella.

"And then, you changed your plans. There would be no point in killing Ella so that her death seemed a natural one —*for* nobody else would know the *D'Yvetots* had triumphed. This was a problem: how to tell the world that a *D'Yvetot* had avenged the family name by a ritual murder of a Longstreet, without giving away your hand. But then you had thought of the family legend of the poltergeist that Lizbeth had told your mother, that had been in your father's mind when he gave you your fanciful name. Why not make it appear that the family ghost had done in grandmama? Especially if there were no marks on the old woman's body, the stupid police would think she had died of terror—or a bad heart. And you could persuade Abigail, who would know nothing of the hand you had played in her grandmother's death, not to permit an autopsy.

"For you couldn't have permitted that, could you have, Arthur Crump? An autopsy would have revealed—as it indeed did—ah-hah, aah-hmn!—the chronic digitalis poisoning and the malnutrition from whch the corpse had suffered during life. You had been the one who had been visiting the house nightly, Mr. Crump, to give a blind old woman doses of strong tea mixed with a drug that slowed her heart—and to steal her food and clothes so that she was naked and starving—"

"That must be so," Maud Dedwent said, "Ella was naked when I found the body lying in the hall. And there was a red wig beside her."

"You saw a *red* wig, Mrs. Derwent?"

"I certainy did," Maud said placidly. "It was lying directly beside the body—"

"Maud!" Edward Prescott cried in anguish. "Dear God, Maud, no!"

Inspector Eliot was beaming. "Mrs. Derwent," he said, "I

must arrest you for the murder of Ella Longstreet. And I wish to inform you, as you should know, that there has never been a red wig—or any other kind of wig. The red-gold tresses that were seen on the poltergeist, and at the hour of nine-nineteen one fateful morning, were indisputably yours."

And he tweaked a curl of my sister's lovely hair, which I have always said was really her one and only good feature.

TWENTY-ONE

MAUD SAT STOLIDLY, her face a blank. She did not move. Her eyes did not blink. Her breathing was shallow. She seemed barely alive. The first sign of change I saw in her was when a tear rolled from the corner of one eye and trickled down her face, streaking the powder. Then her whole body heaved once, her mouth opened lethargically and she said, "You tricked me." Immediately after, her face and form became immobile again.

Her clasped hands were still in an attitude of prayer. Stephen Eliot glanced at them and his mouth tightened, the lids slowly covering his eyes until they were slits of darkness. "I rather imagine it was Mabel who gave you your idea, Maud Derwent," he said.

Maud spoke as in her sleep. "Mabel talked to me. She said Ella was afraid. Afraid of ghosts, of the house burning down, of being poisoned. She had discharged Mabel because she said Mabel was poisoning her."

"And you realized," Eliot continued, "that your grandmother had lived the life of the recluse too long. You sensed that Ella's mental powers were failing her. You knew that if she died, you would get your share of the estate—a small share unless the will was changed. But you had fallen in love with Edward Prescott and he wanted money from you, more money than you had. If you could force your grandmother to change her will in your favor—and then she conveniently died—?"

"I paid her a call. I slipped through the fence and climbed in through an open window. I talked to her, but what she said didn't make sense. She kept talking of Albert D'Yvetot.

She was very thin from not eating. I thought—" Maud still spoke as if from the depths of a trance.

"You thought that Ella's talk of Albert D'Yvetot reflected her fear—and guilt—about Claude's illegitimate son. You noticed she wasn't eating. You decided that if you could somehow present her with Albert D'Yvetot, and threaten her, she would change her will. And since she was starving herself to death, she would probably die soon enough anyway. But how did you produce Albert D'Yvetot for her? Even though she was blind, she would have known a man's voice from a woman's?"

Maud was silent. Eliot waited for her to speak, but she did not.

"You had an accomplice, didn't you?" Eliot said. "He posed as Albert D'Yvetot. It may well have been his idea to stage the waltzing scene in the hall with the music box you had found in Claude's clutter—to frighten away the last servant, Mamie Parsons. You were careful to light the scene, weren't you? You played the poltergeist, with your red-gold hair like Sybil's, and your friend dressed in a night-gown as your grandmother. But he forgot she was blind and looked down. And you both forgot a blind woman would have no need to turn on a light in the upstairs hall. But did you frighten Mamie away? Or was she discharged as she told me?" The Inspector's voice was calm and soothing; he seemed to be telling a sleepy child a bedtime tale.

"I think she was frightend. I think Mamie lied to you because she was ashamed of being frightened," Maud said lethargically.

I understood what Eliot was doing. He knew Maud to be frightened and abnormally excited. He was using, to good effect, the power of suggestion. He was conversing with Maud's memory despite her will. His tone was persuasive, urging confession.

"But then Ella rallied. She had a lucid interval and wrote her lawyer, establishing an irrevocable trust. The next time 'Albert D'Yvetot' threatened her, you received a shock. You had to intensify your intimidation of the old woman, but now your aim was to cause her death. Your aim was simply murder. But you wanted it to be a murder that would appear

to the police to be done by one person—and one person only —your sister, Abigail.

"You had been told by Ella that Abigail was the sole beneficiary of the trust, but at her death the principal reverted to the family, to be divided *per stirpes.*"

Maud laughed mournfully, her eyes closed, her face tense. "Each of us would get his share when Abigail died. But if Abigail died sooner than she thought?"

"Why didn't you simply kill Abigail?"

"We had started with grandmama. We have to cover our tracks."

"And you didn't know that Arthur was watching the house?"

"We thought the police might be. We were careful. But we didn't think about Arthur. We had never heard of Arthur."

Eliot stroked his jaw, deep in thought. "You mixed the digitalis with the tea leaves to slow the old woman's heart action. The drug takes effect only after three days and in massive doses is usually accompanied with vomiting; but that was no bother in your plan, since it only weakened her further. You took away all her clothes except for a shroud. You fed Claude scraps, but you gave Ella nothing."

Maud spoke even more slowly than before. "We planned to have me enter the house, dressed as Abigail dresses, my hair, the same color as hers, showing. We planned to let the dust fall and make the footprints. We planned to call the police and let them see me, as Abigail, enter and leave the house. When they found the body, they would think Abigail did it and was pretending it was a supernatural crime."

"But what if Abigail had an alibi?" the Inspector asked.

"We had arranged to do it at an hour when Abigail was still asleep—and her maid was out shopping. Abigail had no alibi."

"What hurried your plan?"

"Those damnable letters. Everyone received one, as I found out by telephoning after opening my own. We had to work fast. But when I reached the house that morning at nine-nineteen, grandmama was dead in her chair. I set the water on to boil. I carried her naked body into the hall where everyone who opened the door could see it without stepping

in. I left. I can't tell you any more. *He* did the rest. He did all the rest."

Maud stiffened, her eyes opened—then her face relaxed. She even smiled, but she only said, "You're so sure you're clever, Inspector. You make me sick."

Eliot turned his back on her, after noting that Officer McHugh had his gun drawn and covered her possible movements with it. The Inspector walked over to Shirley. "Do you want to change any of your evidence now?"

Shirley gave a quick nod of her head. She swallowed once. "I guess so. I found her lying in the dust, the circle of footprints around her as Abigail said."

"Why didn't you say before?"

"It seemed so silly. The poltergeist and all that, I mean. And then I was glad to see my darling sister-in-law in trouble." Shirley glared at me. "She could have persuaded Ella to advance me the money for the marbles."

Eliot turned to Edward. "What about you?" he said curtly.

"I really can't say," Edward admitted apologetically. "As I told you before, I was so stupefied by seeing the body lying there that—well, I merely stood there, gaping. I didn't take her pulse. *I didn't move.* There may have been dust—and footprints. I guess there must've been."

"And you?" Eliot said to Oliver. He had his notebook out and he thumbed a page. "You saw Ella snoring in her chair, or so you said, between ten-twelve and ten-twenty-two that morning. But your wife put the body in the hall a few minutes after twenty-five minutes to ten?"

"I lied to shield her," said Oliver.

"I knew you lied. We all did," the Inspector said. "But if you hadn't lied, we wouldn't have had the key bit of evidence. When confronted with your first, clumsy lie, Oliver, you tried to fake the words Ella might have said to you, had she been alive. You have a slight imagination and the incoherent words you pretended that you heard actually were a thinly veiled report on the state of your mind. *'Al . . . eeee . . . kill me,'* I deduced meant that you were afraid the murderer would kill you. And throughout the day and night I kept getting reports that you were following your wife, who was having an affair with another man. I knew that, while sitting across the street on your park bench, you had seen

Maud's face when she entered the house—and she had seen you. She had realized that you must have followed her earlier and that you knew she had visited the house, disguised as Abigail, at nine-nineteen."

"I thought she might kill me," Oliver said. "So I said I saw Ella alive."

"That leaves only Lizbeth's contradictory statement about talking with Ella at twenty-five-to-ten, a few minutes after Maud had left her dead," Eliot mused. "The conversation, as you remember," he went on, directing his talk at Arthur and me, "was nonsensical, something about Sybil, something about the samba."

"Mother often makes very little sense," I said. "She may have been frightened at finding poor grandmama nude and dead—and said the first thing that came into her head."

Eliot ran his hand through his thinning hair. "This is the way it was then:

"Nine-nineteen to nine-twenty-four:	Maud dressed as Abigail discovers and places body
"Twenty-five-to-ten to quarter-to-ten:	Lizbeth discovers nude body
"Ten-to-ten to ten-five:	Maud pays call she is expected to make and does something she hasn't told us yet
"Ten-twelve to ten-twenty-two:	Oliver finds nude body and suspects Maud
"Ten-twenty-nine to ten-forty-five:	Jasper finds nude body, examines it — sees no dust or footprints, clothes body in Bikini
"Thirteen-to-eleven to seven-to-eleven:	Edward discovers Bikini-clad body, stands and

	gapes; is not sure about dust
"Eleven o'clock to seven past eleven:	Shirley finds body, clad in Bikini—dust and circle of footprints.

"Which brings us to difficult and delicate matter," the Inspector said. "I refer to the problem of how Ella's body, clad in a brief swimming suit, could have been placed in the midst of a dusty floor with waltzing footprints leading *through* the spot on which she lay, but no other footprints or disturbance of the dust anywhere.

"I have a quesion," I said, "that I want answered first. What about the tea-cup?"

Inspector Stephen Eliot regarded Maud Derwent, who was sitting silently, her face bare of expression, her hands frozen finger-to-finger in her lap. "Do you want to tell us about the cup of tea that stayed warm such a remarkable time and the letters that were burnt in the electric heater?" he asked.

Maud did not speak or in any way show that she had heard the investigator's question.

"Aah-hmn!" Eliot said. "Very well, I shall give the explanation. When Maud returned to the house at ten-minutes-to-ten, she found Ella's body lying where she had left it in the middle of the floor of the great hall where it was clearly visible from the door. She had spoken to her accomplice, who was not due to arrive at the house until later, and I would surmise that between them they had foreseen certain difficulties, that had come from hurrying their plan, and had resolved to take certain precautions. Some of these tasks Maud could best accomplish; others were to be left to the accomplice—since each of them had only a limited amount of time to remain in the house without raising undue suspicion in anyone who might be watching, or having another member of the family, with a later appointment, interrupt him at his tasks.

"So when Maud returned, she set about placing some fake clues in the back drawing room that would *seem* to have been put there by Abigail in a vain attempt to mislead the police as to the time of Ella's death. The murderers wanted the police to determine the time of death, in the usual manner,

from the medical examination. But the murderers also felt they could count on Abigail's pride of family to attempt to thwart a full autopsy which would raise police suspicions, as indeed she did. Furthermore, they must have reasoned, if Abigail could be shown to have placed false clues, that made it appear that Ella had been alive after the time when the condition of the body clearly indicated that she had died, she would be suspected more readily.

"The cup of tea that was still barely warm, that is, a little above room temperature or at least not below it—we can't say what exact degree of warmth since Abigail tested it with her finger and not a thermometer!—was deliberately placed in the back drawing room to help the police suspect Abigail. But how did a cup of tea stay warm from ten o'clock until after one o'clock in the afternoon? The radiant electric heater provides the answer to that. The old lady, long since deprived of her clothes, had been in the habit of keeping the heater behind her chair. I should think that Ella had seldom moved from that chair in her last weeks. Maud and her accomplice, for some reason, had not deprived her of the heater's comfort probably due to the inconsistency of a human mind which, after having conceived of a terrible crime, attempts to mitigate, only in part and inadequately, the murderous intent itself."

"Ha!" Maud said. "You fool. She could not die too soon. She had to live until our plans were complete. We took her clothes so she couldn't leave the house for help."

Eliot nodded his head, his eyes gleaming. "Just so. And you turned the heater on about ten o'clock?"

"When else could I have done it?"

"And it being the kind that develops intense and concentrated heat very quickly, the tea that was boiling when poured into the cup and put on the table beside the chair, was kept at a high temperature until your accomplice entered the house and, as one of his tasks, turned off the radiant heater. Even so, the warmth of the surrounding atmosphere in the room, super-heated for a fairly long period, kept the tea warmish until one—which was what you wanted. But why did you burn letters in the heater?"

"We knew how bumbling the police could be," Maud said with empty bitterness. "Only by burning the letters would

there be an apparent reason—with which most detectives should have been satisfied—for the heater's being in the room."

"There was always the fireplace?"

"It hadn't worked for years. The letters were inconsequential, only more pap for the police."

"Criminals are never as canny as they think, fortunately for us," said the Inspector, preening himself verbally.

"What about the tiny cigarette butt?" I asked.

"Jasper will have to tell you about that," Eliot replied, turning casually to face my brother.

"I was smoking a cigarette when I entered the house. After I had examined my grandmother's body, I went into the back drawing room, probably for sentimental reasons more than because I expected to find clues. It was where grandmama had used to sit when I was a boy," Jasper said.

"I found the heater on as you described. The smoke from the burnt letters was still in the air. I started coughing and I must have put out my cigarette in the ashtray. I don't remember. I was too surprised by what I had found in that room. I guess leaving my cigarette there made it look bad for me, didn't it?"

I should not have thought my brother could be sentimental, or as honest in what he said. I found myself almost liking him.

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" I asked.

Jasper seemed embarrassed. "Why, you see, I thought about it. I knew someone had burnt letters in that room—they must've been incriminating evidence, I decided. I knew that cup of tea was put there for a reason. Then I figured out why the heater was on. And when I heard that a red-haired girl dressed like Abigail had been the first one in the house that morning, and that it had been Abigail who had found the body—officially, if you want to put it like that—that afternoon, why, I made up my mind to say nothing. Abbie, my sister, why, I've never liked her—I think she's tight and a prig and a snob—but she is my sister. You see what I mean?"

"Jasper!" I said. I wanted to say more, but I did not know how to say it.

Jasper had a smirk for me. "That's all right, sister-mine; think nothing of it."

Inspector Eliot was beaming, although I did not understand why he should be pleased. "Now if you will all step into the great hall," he said, "I have arranged a demonstration. My assistants and I are about to show you how a floor that was clean became dusty, how a body was placed in a circle of waltzing footprints so that no other footprints were visible—and how the accomplice, after having done these mysterious things, left the hall without leaving footprints himself."

Shirley led the way into the great hall, followed by Jasper and Edward. Maud had to be urged along by the Inspector. Oliver helped Lizbeth by giving her his arm and Arthur and I followed. As we passed the door, Inspector Eliot was conversing with Officer McHugh who was listening with earnest attention. "You have put the garden roller back on the second floor? Good! Then carry on as we decided." McHugh ducked his head and hurried off up the stairs.

The huge chandelier was lighted as we came into the hall. "The important clue—you will remember my asking Mamie when she had cleaned it last?—was the deposit of dust on the chandelier. If you will look up at it, you will see that it is very dusty, although the floor—thanks to Abigail—is clean.

"That indicated to me," the Inspector said, puffing out his lean cheeks as he talked, "that the dust had fallen from the ceiling—a not unnatural inference from the facts.

"But before we go into how the dust was induced to fall, I want to discuss the matter of time. As late as ten-forty-five yesterday morning when Jasper left the house, there was no dust on the floor. Obviously then, the dust was laid, and the waltzing footprints made, between ten-forty-five and one o'clock, if there had been dust and Abigail and Arthur had told us the truth.

"At first, I was inclined to doubt that there had been either dust or footprints. Then I noticed the deposit of dust on the chandelier when it was switched on last evening. The dust was on the top surfaces of the lusters; there was none on the bottom. Again quite natural, but it did mean that dust had fallen from the ceiling downwards. After Mamie reported cleaning the chandelier, I knew the dust had fallen recently.

"Then there was the curious circumstance of the garden

roller. One of my assistants had reported its existence in the back of the second floor hall early in the afternoon. It was queer, but it didn't strike a spark in my mind until it was used to kill Claude only a few hours ago. Then I knew how the dust had fallen and how the circle of footprints had been made. For my assistants, in searching the grounds, had made another interesting discovery." The Inspector gestured at the coil of rope with the hook at its end that he had brought into the hall with him and had dropped at his feet.

He placed two fingers in between his lips and emitted a loud whistle. "That is the signal for Officer McHugh to begin our little experiment," Eliot said. "Do not be frightened by the noise."

It was a sound very much like the one Jasper and I had heard while we huddled in the dumbwaiter. A low, clangorous rumbling had begun over our heads, accompanied by a series of bumping sounds. The noise was not as loud as before.

"He is rolling the heavy tank, weighted with water, across the floor above," Eliot explained, "lifting it occasionally as much as he can—it is very heavy and though McHugh is strong he can just budge it—to bump the floor. Observe what happens!"

"Dust is falling!" cried Shirley.

It was the exact truth. Dust was evenly falling from the ceiling onto the parquetry of the hall. It fell in long strips as the garden roller passed back and forth in the hall above. When the roller had covered the entire area of the hall above, there was only a ragged, circular patch that remained free of dust. This patch was directly beneath the chandelier. It was where the body had been placed. I knew now why the circle of footprints had occurred where it had, to hide the fact that this part of the floor was only dusty in patches.

"The fall is lighter than before, because most of the dust was dislodged the first time. But enough had fallen to complete our experiment. Miss Longstreet, will you help me by posing as your dead grandmother? I shall have to carry you in my arms and do some alarming maneuvers, but you will be quite safe."

He was daring me, his eyes gleaming. "I am at your disposal."

Eliot led me to the foot of the staircase, where he stood on

the bottommost step and had me stand beside him. "Disregard the footprints we have just made," the Inspector told the others, "as the accomplice was careful not to make them.

"When he—shall we call him Mr. X?—entered the house, he picked up the body and carried it into the upstairs hall. Then he fetched the garden roller—I rather imagine he had found it on the grounds and had brought it into the house at some earlier time. He probably had kept it in the back of the hall for this purpose. He rolled the weighted implement back and forth across the part of the upstairs hall that is directly over the great hall below. Then he stood at the head of the staircase and surveyed his handiwork. Satisfied that the fall of dust was even, he carried Ella's body downstairs. Then—" Inspector Eliot glanced at me and bowed. "I do beg your pardon," he said.

He picked me up and slung me over his back in what I have since heard called "the fireman's carry." It quite knocked the breath out of me and my face flushed because I knew my underthings must be showing. What he did next I have heard described, although all I saw was a part of the marble step and—as I felt a sickening, swooping, soaring sensation—a dizzying arc of dusty floor. Then the floor came up and hit me and I felt as if all my bones had been struck simultaneously by a great hammer.

Eliot had uncoiled the rope, swung it like a lasso so that its hooked and weighted end flew in a circle about his head, thrown it and caught the hook the first time on one of the strong branches of the chandelier. Then, with me over his shoulder, he had made a tremendous swing, hanging onto the rope and moving like a pendulum attached to the chandelier, across the room to the dead center of the hall. There he had dropped me. He had held onto the rope and swung on across and then back with it, putting his feet down again when he was returned to the marble step.

He climbed, hand-over-hand, a few feet up the rope as he swung the second time, shifting his weight so that his swing became circular. As the circle narrowed, he climbed down the rope, letting his feet drop to the floor, picking them up, letting his feet drop again and then picking them up again. He did this until the circle became too tight and the pendulum-swinging rope was about to lose momentum. Then Eliot jumped

high up the rope, heaving as he did so—and the pendulum swung him slowly, but safely, to the threshold of the great hall. He let his feet down, standing on the edge of the vestibule. and waggled the rope until he disengaged the hook. The great chandelier continued to swing madly.

"The chandelier will have ceased all motion within a quarter of an hour. I timed it this evening when no one was in the house. But notice the circle of footprints I have just made—without any others showing, except those I asked you to disregard because Mr. X didn't make them—and also notice that Abigail Longstreet lies across the circle of prints," Eliot said triumphantly.

"Who," I asked, "is Mr. X?" I had a special reason for asking just then. From where I lay on the floor I had been able to see the feet of the others, assembled at the front end of the hall with Eliot. The police were at the other end. Two pairs of feet, while apparently mingling with the others, were edging towards the door. As I looked up to see whose feet they were, Eliot had said,

"Only a man could have rolled and bumped that roller. Only a man could have executed that gigantic swing—only a man who had been a gymnast like myself. Only one man visited the house after ten-forty-five, when Jasper had left it with the floor clean. And only one man stood at the head of the staircase, next to you, Miss Longstreet, when the lights went on a few hours back and we saw that someone had pushed the garden roller onto Claude.

"Claude was loose in the house, having heard Arthur and Abigail on their way up to his stronghold to find him. Of course, the entire family had converged on the house, for various reasons, to find Claude. But only this one man feared that Claude might have seen his operations in making the footprints—and in a panic had decided to kill Claude to keep him from informing the police in some way. This man had never talked to him and didn't know how inarticulate Claude really was. He tracked him to the stairhead and pushed the garden roller down the stairs on top of him as the poor fellow tried to escape.

"And only one man, when questioned about what he had done in the house yesterday morning, insisted that he had never moved. Liars often emphasize the reverse of the truth.

The man whose guilt was expressed in the exaggerated and complex movements he had taken, insisted that he had not moved. And he was the man who needed a large amount of money quickly and desperately, who was married to one Longstreet and having an affair with another. Mr. X was Edward Presscott!"

"Both Mr. and Mrs. X have just slipped out the door behind you," I told the Inspector drily, "while you were busy having your big scene."

Stephen Eliot smiled slowly at me. He took his pigskin case from his pocket and extracted a cigar. He smoothed its surface gently with his thumb. "They will not get far. My assistants are expecting them."

* * *

Dawn had made the sky above Central Park a delicate mauve color, raddled with streaks of silvery cotton wool. The air was brisk and dewy; Arthur's arms around me helped me to feel warm and loved, a part of the dawn. I was not sleepy, although I had not slept. I had awakened to a new life.

"You were helping Eliot with the investigation all along," I said, "Arthur, it was cruel of you not to tell me."

"I couldn't tell you, darling. Eliot kept insisting, whenever I saw him or phoned him, that you might have done it."

"Did you think so, Arthur?"

"Never for a moment."

"When did you see or talk to Eliot?"

"Before I came to your house yesterday morning, also when I excused myself at dinner—I went to telephone then—and after I had left Jasper and you in Claude's room; the last time was when Eliot and I planned his mock accusation of me and the business about the wig to trap Maud."

"I never did understand that. First, there was the compressed air cylinder that was buried in the mud under the grape arbor and trampled upon by bare feet. Then Eliot said it was helium, not air. He said Claude had stolen it in the Park. Then you mentioned the red wig. Before that, I believe, Eliot had one of his assistants go out in the hall and look up. He told the man to 'bring it down any way you can.' We

heard two loud noises and Eliot said his assistant had shot it down."

I laughed and laid my head against Arthur's shoulder. "A man is nice. I should have had one before this. You know, you'll laugh, but I thought someone had hidden the wig by inflating a balloon— I saw it as a red balloon, maybe because Eliot kept saying Mamie's face which was red was like a balloon—anway, I thought the balloon, full of helium, had been attached to the wig and had carried it up to the ceiling. And that was what Eliot's assistant had shot at—the wig."

"It isn't as silly as you think," Arthur said, his hand moving softly, gently, lovingly, along my back. "Eliot created the entire line of reasoning, from the cylinder to the balloon and the non-existent wig, to worry the muderer.

"Eliot also had me pretend that I had seen Ella before she died—and that she recognized me. As he explained it to me, only the murderer knows all that happened. If it is possible for the detective to invent a complication, that logically fits the crime, the murderer will eventually feel it necessary to invent an explanation for the non-existent facts. But only the murderer will know they are non-existent and that is why the detective will know that the person who offers the explanation is the murderer."

"There wasn't any cylinder in the first place?" I asked.

"Oh, there was a cylinder. Claude took it from the Park, I guess. And there were footprints, but I think Eliot made them himself or one of his assistants. You know, the old boy enjoyed making us take off our shoes. But the cylinder of helium had no connection with the non-existent wig or the shot fired in the air by Eliot's assistant."

I looked at Arthur long and lovingly, as I had never looked at any man before. "I think I want to be kissed," I said.

"Just this once—and never again, unless—"

"Unless?"

"Unless you promise me to stop wearing those ludicrous clothes," Arthur said.

"We'll see about that," I said. "But right now—this very minute—I want to tell you that you are a most handsome man and kindly request that you kiss me."

* * *

I think that is all I need to write to supply the curious reader with those facts that are at least accurate and unbiased. The rest of what happened is merely personal, and although I daresay it would be of rare interest to some, I deplore those whose taste would allow them still to anticipate a further disclosure. *Honi soit qui mal y pense.*

THE END

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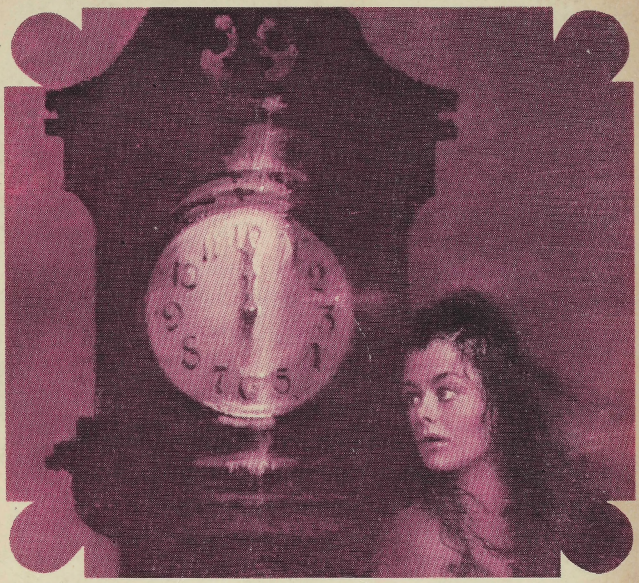

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